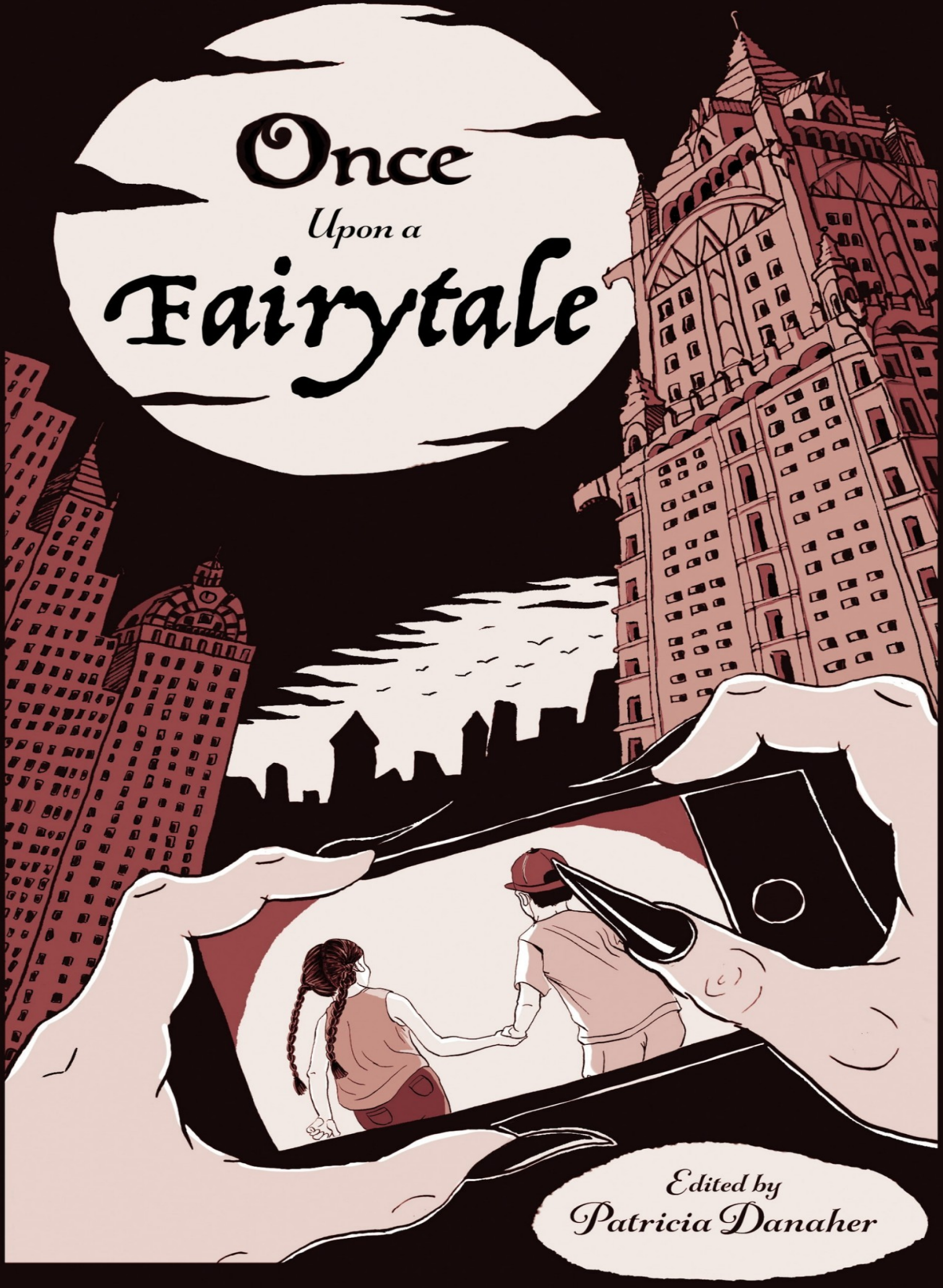
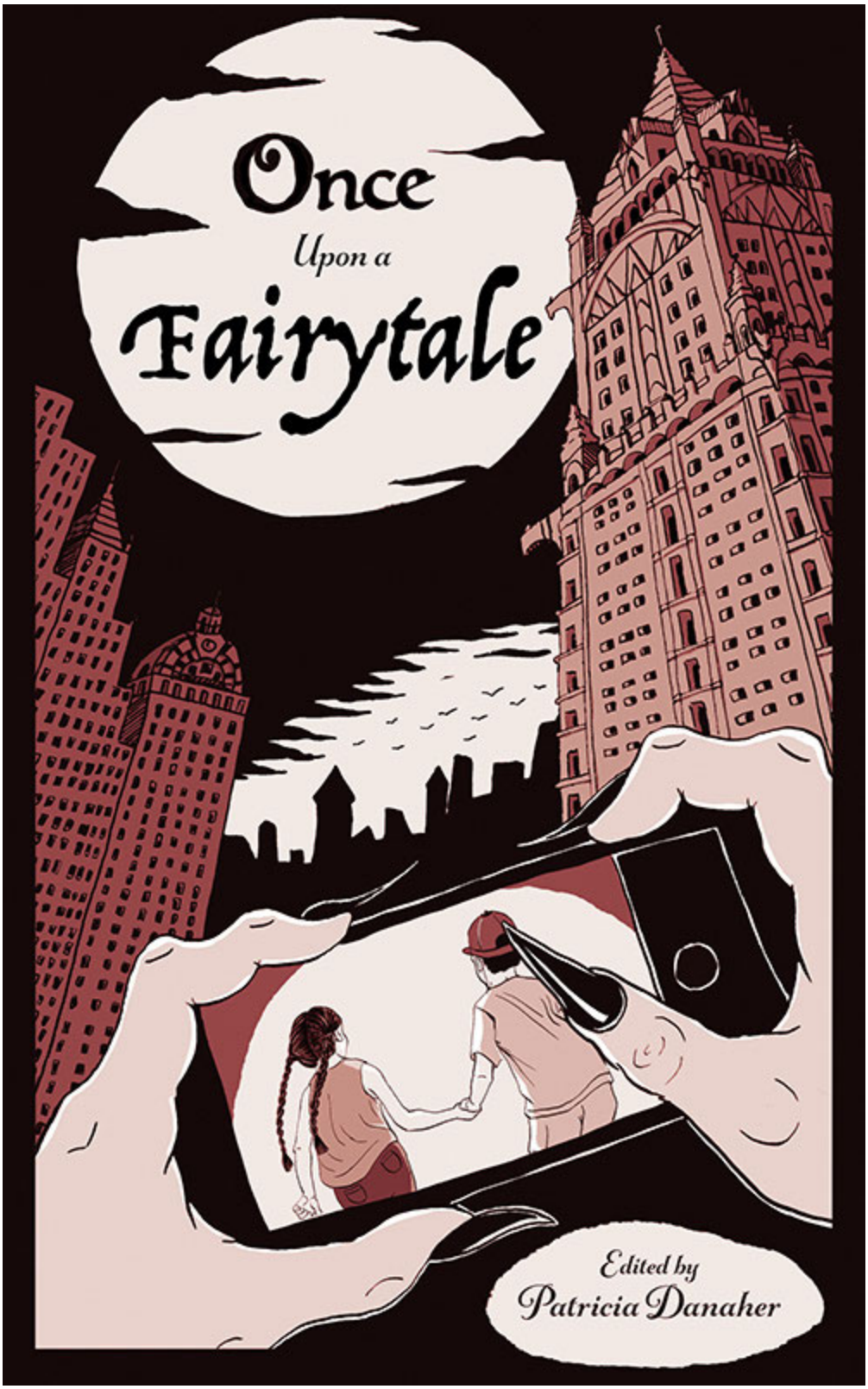
# Once Upon a Fairytale



Edited by Patricia Danaher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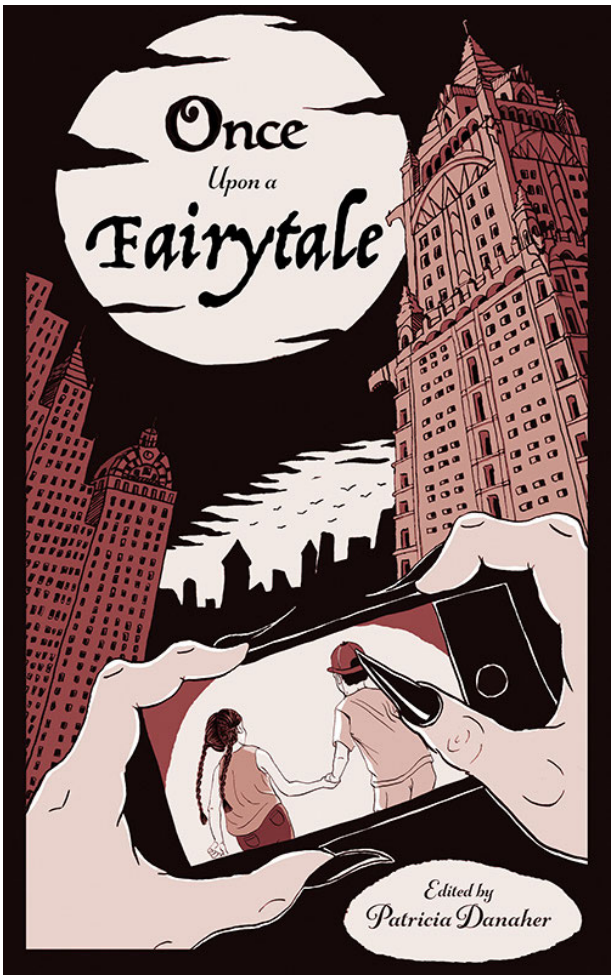
Once
Upon a
Fairytale
Edited by
Patricia Danaher

# *Once Upon a Fairytale*

# Once Upon a Fairytale

## An Anthology

*Edited by Patricia Danaher*

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# Foreword

“

Once upon a time.” That was how our ancestors separated the counterfactual—the great “What if?”—from news, gossip, and small talk. For them, storytelling was not just a way of passing along wisdom, knowledge, and survival skills (always easier to remember when packaged in the form of a story), but also an important pathway for developing incremental intelligence and moving to the top of the food chain. “Watch out!” these stories announced. Here’s what might never happen, should never happen, and maybe even could never happen, but it will help you use your imagination and ingenuity.

In Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Yuval Noah Harari describes a “cognitive revolution” that enabled Homo sapiens to survive and thrive like no other species. Harari sees as pivotal not so much the invention of language as a tool for transmitting knowledge but the capacity of language to create fiction—stories about things that have no grounding in reality. These collective fictions take the form of myth, legend, and religion. They enable humans to cooperate in large groups. Stories, as it turns out, are also nothing but invented constructs: “There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings.”1 We take that on faith, and we have survived precisely because we create collective fictions and improbably turn ourselves into true believers.

Harari does not pay much attention to the collective fictions we know to be lies and to which we bring skepticism. They are what Zora Neale Hurston called “big old lies,” and they take the form of the symbolic stories we use, not so much to build the foundations of the legal, political, and commercial world of Homo sapiens as to make sense of the world and to develop an understanding of who we are and why we do the things we

do. When we tell fairytales, myths, or legends and create literary fictions, we are supremely aware that the stories are not true. Yet we keep telling them, not because they give us historical facts but because they make us think more and think harder about the vexing cultural contradictions that are part of the human condition.

As the “life-lightening trash of pre-literate people” (that’s John Updike), fairytales also came to operate as adult entertainment in an age before social media, film streaming, and the many other diversions offered up by our devices. Fairytales work their magic as they evolve, adding new layers as they slough off some of the old, giving us both story and history. The narratives we know as “Snow White,” “Rapunzel,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” have a long, complex, stratified history. They link us with our past, the ancestors who once told stories, even as the narratives are made new, becoming relevant when adapted for the next generation.

Ever since what is now called The Walt Disney Company became our portal to fairytales, we have thought of these stories as tales for the young. But in fact, although fairytales may have migrated into the nursery with the rise of print culture, they continue to lead a robust afterlife in adult entertainments. Take the case of “Little Red Riding Hood,” a story that seems now to be the exclusive cultural property of children. We have countless picture books about the girl in red, each about minding what mother has said and warning of the dangers of straying from a path. If, back in the early nineteenth century, the Brothers Grimm were zealous about recruiting German tales for moral and behavioral instruction, today we are downright fanatical about making sure to embed a message in a story.

But Little Red Riding Hood has also wandered into adult culture, with a heroine who has become ever more wayward, seductive, and sultry. She has moved from the position of prey to that of predator, becoming the big, bad, bawdy gal of Tex Avery’s 1943 cartoon Red Hot Riding Hood, as well as the promiscuous heroine of Tiffany Reisz’s 2016 Little Red Riding Crop: An Erotic Novella. Cinematic culture dotes on Little Red Riding Hood almost as much as Granny does, creating girls larger than life and also twice as unnatural in films like The Company of Wolves (1984),

Freeway (1996), Hard Candy (2005), and Hanna (2011). She has returned with a vengeance, and yet we continue to think of her as situated exclusively in the domain of children's literature.

When it comes to fairytales, we are always making it new. Each version—poetic, dramatic, cinematic, or literary—engages in what fairytale DNA does so well, continually replicating itself to produce stories that compel us to think through the psychological stakes in them. The tales in this volume may not dismantle or topple the authority of, say, the Disney version, but they reveal just how many different narrative possibilities are embedded in the fairytale structure we call "Cinderella," "The Little Mermaid," or any one of many endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful that constitute the fairytale universe.

Professor Maria Tatar

John L. Loeb Research Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures and of Folklore and Mythology

# Introduction

**F**

airytales are the first stories most of us ever hear. As children, we absorb the pluck of children in the face of adult perfidy, cheering the heroism of "Hansel and Gretel" or "Beauty and the Beast." Counterpoised by the wickedness and cruelty of parents, stepmothers, and wolves in sheep's clothing, children's wiliness usually leaves them unharmed, if not heroic. And the stories make for satisfying reading. Scary but satisfying when read as children, fairytales when encountered in adulthood often seem chilling to us in ways they did not before.

We never forget the tales we are told as children. Most of us will happily reread or rewatch them again when we are older. The archetypal structure of these stories has a satisfying, if troubling, tilt. To be a child in the world of fairytales is often perilous and terrifying. Someone or something seems to constantly try to kill or eat you or marry you off. Parents, especially the feminine, are often lethal.

The Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault did a massive service to the Western psyche in collecting and writing down the fairy and folktales. As adults, we keep returning to them again and again in film, in theatre, and in books. How many romantic comedies do stories like "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella" inspire? Countless thrillers have a quest and danger in the style of "Little Red Riding Hood" or "The Little Mermaid."

*Once Upon a Fairytale is a deliberate, modern retelling of several of these classic fairytales, with a fable and a song thrown into the mix. Seeing the response to this anthology delighted me. I hope the reader will recognize how a good yarn, well told, neither ages nor goes out of fashion.*

Patricia Danaher

Director of Harvardwood Publishing

# The Golden Ticket

By Jonathan Demson

**J**

ones woke up the morning of his fiftieth birthday and realized that he had achieved nothing in his life. Though he was estranged from his wife, Margaret, they continued to live under the same roof because he was unemployed and could not afford his own place. The house had been given to Margaret by her father, Ned, a successful small-town businessman who had never liked Jones and insisted on putting the house in Margaret's name.

In order to remain living in the house, Jones had been forced to accept the most onerous terms, including allowing Margaret to supervise his spending. At the age of 50, Jones was forbidden by his own wife from having a credit card. He was given a small cash allowance for incidental expenses, but even that was closely scrutinized by Margaret, who got the money from her father and therefore felt entitled to treat Jones like an irresponsible teenager.

Jones was also required to call Margaret twice a day so that she could keep tabs on him. Failure to call at the appointed time was punishable by fresh layers of humiliation. First, she would yell at him. Next, he would be assigned a week's worth of additional chores around the house. Finally—and this was the worst part—he would be required to draft a memorandum explaining why he had failed to call and the steps he was taking to ensure that it never happened again.

Margaret's brother, Ken, was Jones' college classmate and lived two streets over with his wife, Sheila, who was pretty and had a nice body. Jones could never understand why she had married Ken. Jones met Ken during freshman week and took an immediate hating to him. Ken took for

granted his own future success and had the infuriating habit of suggesting career paths for Jones that Ken considered beneath himself.

The truth was that neither had done particularly well, but Ken had done a little better than Jones and lorded it over him. Now that Jones had been laid off from his most recent job, Ken liked to come over to the house on Saturday mornings and bug him. Ken would talk about work or some vacation he was planning with Sheila—topics calculated to embarrass Jones. Sometimes Ken would pretend to forget that Jones had been laid off and ask him how work was going, only to feign sudden recollection—"Oh, that's right, I'm forgetting." Jones suspected that Ken did not have very much money either, but Jones was vulnerable on that issue and had to take Ken's condescension on the chin.

For her part, Margaret always provided Ken with the reactions he needed to maximize Jones' discomfort. If Ken was rambling on about some project at work, Margaret would gasp, praising his hard work and achievements, and then, glancing derisively at Jones, remark in a surly voice, "At least one of the men in this room is a productive member of society." If Ken were describing some resort hotel where he and Sheila had spent the long weekend, Margaret would moan with exaggerated envy and then glare at Jones in silent reproach for his inability to provide the same for her. Ken made no effort to cloak his delight and satisfaction with these little weekend pageants.

Occasionally, Jones' rage brought him to the verge of a searing rejoinder. Then he would remember Margaret's tight grip and blood-curdling punishments, which were never far from the forefront of his thoughts, and bite his tongue, enduring the latest indignity in silence.

Jones' sole remaining pleasure in life was his secret purchase each Friday afternoon, when Margaret was at therapy, of a lottery ticket. In order to escape Margaret's scrutiny, Jones had to settle for one of the smaller lotteries. The prize was a paltry million, but the ticket cost only five dollars, which was about as much as he could spend on a weekly basis without having to account for it. Jones knew that he would almost certainly never win, but that weekly fantasy of suddenly coming into a million dollars was what kept him going for the rest of the week.

Jones would wait until he heard the front door close and the car pull out of the driveway, which was the signal to hurry over to the corner store a few blocks away and purchase the ticket. He then had about half an hour to hide in the back of the store until it was time to call Margaret, at precisely five o'clock, and provide a detailed account of his movements since the morning call—carefully omitting any mention of his trip to the corner store.

Of late, Jones had to be extra careful, as Ken had taken to spying on him in the hopes of finding out something juicy to report back to Margaret. Ken would even arrange to leave work at odd times just to catch Jones unawares, so there was almost no time during the week that Jones was safe.

But the danger was worth it. Holding the newly acquired lottery ticket delicately with both hands as if carrying some ancient and precious parchment, Jones would retreat to the dry goods aisle in the back of the store. There he would stand, staring adoringly at the ticket in the dim, yellow-green light of an overhead lamp coated with decades of dust and muck and dead flies. The shelves in this part of the store were crammed with bags of rice, bacon bits, and breadcrumbs that had not been disturbed for years. Dusty cans of some unidentifiable, foreign legume mixture stood next to plastic containers of some universally shunned brand of ketchup. Such goods having no relevance to the livelihood of the store, the proprietors, two Lebanese brothers, never took the slightest interest in what Jones did back there.

This gloomy alcove hardly seemed like anyone's idea of a secret garden, with its filthy, unswept floor and stale air. For Jones, it was hallowed ground. There, in that forgotten, little, private space, he was free to imagine a World suddenly made perfect: His debts paid off, Margaret run over by a dump truck or devoured by wolves, a stunning, new penthouse apartment, Ken fired, arrested, and divorced in an embezzlement scandal covered by the local television station, first class travel to Paris or Fiji, a European folding wallet teeming with elite credit cards, and Margaret's father exposed as a draft dodger who had lived for years in Canada disguised as a woman, a story also picked up by the local news and later

depicted in a Lifetime movie of the week. In some versions, Jones would have a fling with Sheila, who would tearfully express her regret at having chosen Ken instead of him.

The winning lottery numbers in the Saturday paper would bring the blissful reverie to an end, and Jones would sigh and brace himself for another week of real life. But for those few precious hours, he would float along in an imagined world of endless possibilities encapsulated in that lottery ticket.

Jones' weekly indulgence was not without risk, however, and disaster struck one Friday evening. Jones had chosen this particular corner store because it seemed like the last place he would ever run into anyone he knew. But suddenly, there was Ken, holding an energy drink and grinning at Jones triumphantly. Jones wasn't sure whether Ken had seen the lottery ticket, which he hastily shoved in his pocket. They made some small talk, laced with the usual passive-aggressive pokes, as Jones fumbled for his cell phone. After a moment, he excused himself and retreated once again to the back of the store where, in the relative seclusion of the dusty shelves, he would mutter resentful words of submission to his watchful wife. On this particular occasion, however, Jones had accidentally left his cell phone on. The battery was down to a single percentage point, hardly enough to complete his call.

Jones could feel the panic welling up inside him. He had lost track of time a few weeks before and called thirteen minutes late. Failure to call this evening would be interpreted as deliberate insubordination. Even worse, the punishment would be especially hideous, as Ned needed someone to help him clean out his garage, and Jones knew that Margaret would volunteer his assistance on the slightest pretext. The prospect of spending hours and probably days with Ned, sorting through musty boxes while Ned badgered him about his shortcomings, was simply unbearable.

Jones managed to enter the number and could hear the phone ringing. Then Margaret answered and, dispensing with the usual preliminaries, he launched hurriedly into the report required by the five o'clock call, which was received as usual with a series of short barks. When the barking suddenly ceased, however, he realized that his cell phone had died.

Returning to the front of the store, Jones saw that Ken had not left. Having paid for his energy drink, Ken was dawdling at the magazine rack, but he was clearly waiting for Jones, hoping that the encounter might yield some form of advantage or dividend. Ignoring Ken, Jones asked the clerk if he could use the store phone, which was sitting right next to them on the counter, but he soon realized that the man had no intention of letting him use the telephone for free, and he had nary a cent left in his pocket.

Jones now regretted having asked the store clerk first. It showed Ken how desperate he was and justified Ken's feigned indignation that Jones had sought to bypass him. Ken, as always, played his advantage to the hilt, sipping his energy drink and eyeing Jones suspiciously, without bothering to respond to his request.

Jones clenched his teeth, seething with rage, but Ken had him over a barrel, and Jones knew from experience that Ken would make things as difficult as possible. He found himself in the middle of a lengthy and unconvincing explanation of why it was so important that he call Ken's sister right away when Ken suddenly pointed at Jones' coat pocket, raising his eyebrows.

"Does Margaret know you spend your allowance on lottery tickets?" he asked, with mock concern.

Jones stared at Ken, momentarily at a loss as to how to respond. He was neither experienced at physical combat nor much of an athlete, but the admixture of anger and loathing that now flowed through his veins seemed to have imbued him with superhuman strength. He considered hurling himself on Ken, wrestling him to the floor, and forcibly extracting the cell phone from his pocket.

But it was Ken who ended up taking the initiative, beckoning at Jones with one hand while offering his cell phone with the other.

“I get the ticket, you get your phone call.”

Jones paused to consider the potentially disastrous ramifications of the situation. If he gave Ken the ticket, Ken would take it straight to Margaret, and once she got wind of his weekly ritual, Jones had no doubt that she would take steps to exterminate the last remnants of happiness he had managed to eke out of an otherwise miserable existence. Without the ticket, it would be Ken’s word against his, which would complicate Margaret’s ability to conduct a successful investigation or pass final judgment on him.

On the other hand, Ken remained oblivious to the secret world to which the lottery ticket provided access. The more readily Jones gave it up, the less importance Ken would attach to it. What was more, if Ken gave the ticket to Margaret, he would have to explain how he had obtained it, which would make him look bad. Ken might try to lie, of course, but Margaret would know that Jones had called her from Ken’s cell phone, and despite her efforts to portray her brother as a saint, she knew all too well that he was a habitual fibber.

There was no good option, but Jones ultimately decided that evading Margaret’s wrath and days of agony in Ned’s garage in exchange for a five-dollar lottery ticket was too good a deal to refuse.

As Jones hurriedly poked at the number keys on Ken’s cell phone, Ken studied the lottery ticket with an air of amusement. For the next few minutes, Margaret subjected Jones to a verbal beating for hanging up on her during the middle of the first call and then failing to call back for a full five minutes, but he knew that these infractions did not constitute sufficient grounds to sentence him to a week in Ned’s garage. Jones figured that, all things considered, he had dodged a bullet.

The next morning over coffee, he reflected ruefully that it was the first Saturday in months that he would not be checking the newspaper for the

winning lottery numbers. Normally, because he could not risk Margaret catching sight of the actual ticket, he would memorize the last three digits of the number. Every once in a while, he would have to sneak another peek at the actual ticket, in a moment of intense excitement, because the last three digits were a match.

There was always a little pang of disappointment when his hopes were dashed for another week, but he knew that the disappointment was all part of what made the previous few hours so exhilarating, for there was always that tiny chance that the dream might actually come true in defiance of the odds.

Margaret was in the middle of her usual Saturday morning harangue, which this week concerned the shame involved in drinking coffee for which Jones had not helped pay, when she was interrupted by the curious sound of Ken coming up the driveway, singing lustily at the top of his voice. Ken usually came over on Saturdays but never this early, and he was not given to announcing his arrival by singing. A moment later, he burst through the back door, beaming.

Ken had won the lottery. He had won a million dollars.

Jones took several minutes to process this information. Ken, of course, made no mention of the meeting at the corner store the night before. Jones was in no position to allude to it in front of Margaret. Aside from the fact that he was strictly forbidden from spending money on such frivolities, if Margaret learned that Jones had given away the winning lottery ticket, she would never forgive him, and her wrath would be terrible indeed.

When Margaret excused herself to use the bathroom, Ken seized the opportunity to sit down at the table across from Jones with a huge grin.

“Can you believe it?” he asked, with fiendish pleasure.

Jones decided to attack immediately. Raising both fists in the air in a gesture of victory, he smiled excitedly at Ken.

“We did it!”

At this, Ken sat back in his chair, gazing calmly at Jones as his lips curled into a smirk.

“Nice try.”

Jones’ mind raced. Margaret’s brief absence from the kitchen would be his one and only opportunity to make his case for at least a portion of the winnings. But the situation was delicate. Jones knew that, if he lost his temper, Ken would gain the advantage and the game would be forfeit. Nonetheless, there were clearly equities in Jones’ favor. They were family, after all, and should all share in the good fortune. Jones, not Ken, had bought the winning lottery ticket. It was only because Ken had shamefully extorted it in exchange for the use of his cell phone that Ken had ended up with the ticket. Jones reasoned that he was being more than generous in offering to split the proceeds with Ken.

Ken saw things differently, of course. As far as he was concerned, his spectacular good fortune—and Jones’ outrageously bad luck—was simply how things had turned out. Jones had traded him the winning ticket, and that was that.

During the next few minutes, Ken stuck with maddening consistency to this simple yet unassailable line of argument, while Jones cast about with growing desperation for some angle that would give him the moral high ground and confer legitimacy on his claim to at least some of the money.

At the sound of Margaret returning from the bathroom, however, Ken saw the look of desperation on Jones’ face, sat back, drummed his fingers on the kitchen table, and silently declared victory. He had anticipated that Jones might try to claim the winnings. Jones might even involve Margaret and risk everything by telling the story of the night before in order to gain the upper hand. But Ken enjoyed a huge advantage, the element of surprise. Jones had to scramble to come up with his arguments on the spot,

while Ken had had all morning to assess which response would be the most effective. Now, as Margaret unwittingly ran out the clock, they both knew that the game was up and the money was Ken's—all of it.

Flush with victory, Ken was now determined to rub it in by claiming that he had obtained the winning ticket by means of a kind of mystical skill. In the coming weeks, he would tell the story over and over again of how he had suddenly felt moved to enter that particular corner store at that particular moment in time and buy a lottery ticket. Aware of how agonizing these stories were to Jones, he would employ flowery language and an endless string of metaphors, all of which attested to the cosmic significance of his win, what it said about him, and his destiny.

Ken and Sheila wasted no time adjusting to the lifestyle of the newly arrived, every aspect of which Ken made sure to describe to Jones and Margaret in excruciating detail. Ken had hired a consultant to help him realize his dream of opening his own restaurant. Like a hungry kitten at a dish of cream, Margaret would lap up Ken's descriptions of the fabulous menu he was planning, the ornate chandeliers, and the waiters' uniforms, grunting and groaning with approval at all the right moments as Jones sat fuming in the corner, pretending to read the want ads. Ken also enjoyed providing colorful accounts of the couple's lavish shopping sprees, making sure to linger over his descriptions of the shops that would appeal most to Margaret.

Over the next few weeks, while Ken and Sheila paraded around town in their newest finery, Jones was subjected to a fresh barrage of letters from his creditors, each one a painful reminder of his impossibly bad luck. As broke as ever, he had no choice but to pass these hateful missives along to his wife for payment. Far from sympathizing with his plight, Margaret seemed to enjoy watching him get squeezed. She would cover the occasional bill but often only in part and never enough to reduce the flow of threatening letters.

Jones' status as a kind of indentured, domestic servant all but prevented him from seeking employment. The vicious cycle seemed only to intensify as the weeks and months went by.

The worst part of it all was that Jones' secret world, the one thing that had kept him going, lay in ruins. Key to the fantasy was the chance, however slight, that he might actually win the lottery, that the dream might actually come true. But, whereas the possibility of winning once was at least conceivable, the notion that the same extraordinary stroke of luck might repeat itself was too far-fetched to sustain the fantasy. That indispensable, little pinch of fairy dust having been sprinkled, the magic was gone.

Meanwhile, Ken had come up with a new device with which to torture Jones. He had memorized an old Albert King tune, "Born Under a Bad Sign," and made a habit of singing it during his Saturday morning visits.

*Born under a bad sign*

*Been down since I began to crawl*

*If it wasn't for bad luck, you know,*

*I wouldn't have no luck at all*

Ken would sing the first stanza, drawing out the key words, and follow up with a cackle of glee, leering at Jones. After a couple of weeks, the tune having become familiar, Margaret, lost in her crossword puzzle, would sometimes sing along, oblivious to the cruel innuendo contained in the lyrics.

Ken was master of the game. And yet, there was a curious absurdity to his antics. Jones began to wonder why, when there were so many other diversions he could now afford, Ken kept coming over to the house on Saturday mornings to torment his ancient adversary. Every now and again he caught Ken watching him, as if there were some riddle to Jones he was unable to solve.

One Saturday morning, Ken arrived at the house driving a sparkling new Mercedes-Benz two-seater, a car that was famously Margaret's absolute favorite. It was even fire engine red, the color Margaret had always said she would choose. The gambit elicited precisely the reaction from Margaret it was designed to provoke. Upon seeing the car, she gasped, covered her mouth with both hands, and then cried a little. Eventually, like clockwork, she turned on Jones with a venom that would normally have sent him packing to his bedroom, there to hide out for several hours until she simmered down.

But there was something odd about Ken's latest purchase. They had all attended a dinner party only a year before at which Margaret and Sheila had become embroiled in an argument over whether Mercedes or Rolls-Royce made the best cars. Margaret had corrected Sheila on several occasions in the past, and Sheila was now determined to prove Margaret wrong about something. Fueled by several more glasses of wine, the argument had devolved into personal attacks as the other guests looked on with growing amusement. To make matters worse, Ken had sided with his sister.

When Margaret's arguments turned to mockery, Sheila decided to raise the stakes by claiming that only someone with Nazi sympathies would buy a German car, while any English-speaking customer would naturally prefer an English car, though, in her drunken confusion, the preferred car had become an Alfa Romeo. The reference to fascism having prompted a roar of disapproval from around the table, Sheila, now red in the face and furious, sought refuge in her wine glass. Having grown up pretty, she was unaccustomed to disagreement, and her claims grew increasingly ludicrous as she sank deeper and deeper into a pool of embarrassment.

Having witnessed this debacle, Jones found Ken's choice of new car baffling. Why would he buy the one car certain to result in public embarrassment to his wife? Sheila was not letting on that she did not share her husband's enthusiasm for the new Mercedes, but Jones found it hard to believe that the selection had not given rise to considerable friction behind closed doors.

In the ensuing days, Ken continued to sing his favorite song, but, the initial shock value of the lyrics having worn off, he had taken to substituting his own, blunter lyrics.

*Born under a bad sign*

*Been down since HE began to crawl*

*If it wasn't for bad luck, you know,*

*JONES wouldn't have no luck at all*

Margaret, ever the able and willing ally in Ken's assaults on Jones, quickly took to singing along with the revised lyrics.

As usual, Ken would follow the last line with a howl of laughter. One Saturday, however, the familiar cackle had followed the last line of the song so loudly and so closely that it created an unintended, comic effect, and Jones and Margaret both giggled. Ken was startled by their reaction and momentarily froze, glaring confusedly at Jones. The spell was broken, and one of Ken's favorite ploys had been spontaneously neutralized.

Ken lingered at the house longer than usual that morning. When Margaret left them alone in the kitchen for a moment, Ken's agitation boiled over and he whirled around.

"Why don't you ever say anything?"

Before Jones had a chance to respond, however, Margaret returned to the kitchen, whereupon Ken abruptly excused himself and left.

That spring, Jones finally landed a part-time job at the library. Margaret, who had grown accustomed to treating him like her personal valet, could hardly veil her disappointment, but what could she do? Having hectored

him for months to find gainful employment, she could hardly prevent him from accepting the position.

Determined never to return to the ranks of the unemployed, Jones threw himself into his duties with an ardor the likes of which the library had never seen. It was not long before he was offered a full-time position as assistant librarian.

Around this time, signs began to appear that all was not well in Ken and Sheila's fairytale world. Ken had quit his job to focus on the new restaurant. While he and Sheila were both experts in the many uses of their credit cards, neither was particularly well-versed in accounting. Neither realized until it was too late that the money Ken had won, though certainly more than he had ever imagined having at one time, was in fact not enough to live on for the rest of their lives, and certainly not in the lifestyle to which they had quickly become accustomed. Indeed, after the new car, several vacations, an expensive home renovation, and a series of outlays for Ken's restaurant, half the money was gone.

But having experienced the sudden, giddy elevation in her lifestyle, Sheila was not prepared to retreat to a more sensible or sustainable existence. She began to complain publicly that Ken had mismanaged the couple's finances.

The upshot of all of this was tremendous, new pressure on Ken to make his restaurant a success. But Ken had no previous experience in the notoriously volatile restaurant business, and his well-paid consultant had long ago moved on to other clients. With only a few weeks to go before opening night, there was little evidence of the public fanfare so crucial to a successful launch. Ken tried to maintain a brave face, but he had begun drinking during the day, and his usual delight in perpetrating mischief had given way to sullenness and self-pity.

One day, Jones was mowing the front lawn when Ken pulled up in his Mercedes, lurching to a stop at an awkward angle to the curb. Staggering out of the car, he paused a few feet away from Jones, assuming the stance of a gunfighter squaring off in the Old West. He began singing hoarsely, slurring the words in long, drawn-out syllables.

*Born under a bad sign*

*Been down since he began to crawl*

*If it wasn't for bad luck, you know*

*If it wasn't for REEEEAAAAL bad luck,*

*Jones wouldn't have no luck at all*

This time, however, there was no cackle at the end of the song. Instead, Ken just stood there, glaring in silence at Jones, who had switched off the lawnmower and wondered what Ken was up to now. Suddenly, Ken rushed at Jones, tackling him to the ground. A moment later, looking vaguely embarrassed, Ken got to his feet and then, extending his hand, helped Jones back up.

Jones was irritated at having been tackled. Although he was unhurt, he decided to retaliate by punching Ken in the arm as hard as he could. Ken, who had turned slightly away from Jones, did not see the blow coming. He grunted from the pain and lurched a few inches but managed to maintain his balance and made no move to respond, continuing to stand sideways to Jones with his face turned slightly away.

"I don't know what to do," he said, still facing away from Jones. "I'm in a lot of trouble."

Ken's body began to tremble, and his voice quavered.

“You’re my only true friend.”

Jones wanted to laugh. This pathetic imbecile, this absurd primate of a human being, this grotesque creature who had spent the better part of his adult life persecuting Jones, who had cheated him out of a fabulous fortune only to devise endless means of further tormenting him, was standing there, claiming friendship, a claim that would have been laughable were it not so outrageous.

And yet, for all of the built-up resentment, the sight of Ken momentarily stripped naked of all his defenses had a strange effect on Jones. For years, he had dreamed of shoving Ken head first down a manhole, of presiding over his ruin and disgrace, of sitting ringside while Ken was subjected to the most humiliating depredations. He had longed for the moment when Ken’s jugular was exposed, when he could somehow destroy him in a spectacular fireball of glorious revenge for the thousands of petty insults and injuries he had suffered at Ken’s hands over the years. Yet, here he was, as vulnerable as Jones had ever seen him. Jones’ desire to cause him harm had somehow vanished.

The two men stood next to each other for a moment or two in silence. Then Ken sighed and seemed to pull himself together, shuffled back to the Mercedes, and was off without so much as a glance or another word to Jones, who gazed after him as the exquisite whine of the German-engineered sports car gradually faded away.

The events of that fall took place with dizzying speed. Ken’s Asian Fusion Steakhouse closed only a few weeks after its grand opening. Ken had paid a lot for a lounge singer on opening night and the turnout was decent, but business tapered off quickly thereafter. The writing was on the wall.

Ken sold the Mercedes at a substantial loss. Sheila stood by with apparent acceptance as items were quietly returned to stores. But when Ken cancelled the holiday cruise to Hawaii, the facade of affluence could no longer be maintained and her mood turned black. A month later, Ken confided to Margaret that Sheila’s closet and dresser had been emptied and

she was gone. He had heard that she had been spotted at a sports bar with a retired quarterback ten years her junior.

As far as Margaret knew, the money was all gone.

Ken had stopped coming over on Saturday mornings. In the absence of his weekly tormentor, Jones had begun helping Margaret with the crossword puzzle. He had taken on a wide range of projects at the library, transforming what was supposed to be a nine-to-five job into an 80-hour workweek. Although his original purpose had been simply to avoid Margaret as much as possible, his long workdays had had the unanticipated consequence of relieving some of the pressure on their marriage. The paycheck was small but enough to begin chipping away at his mountain of debt. His co-workers at the library, each of whom had benefitted from their new colleague's gusto, held him in high regard. Even Ned surprised everyone one day by dropping a favorable mention of Jones' work ethic.

Ken managed to go back to work at his old company but only on the condition that he accept a position several rungs below the one he had left, with the unfortunate consequence that he now worked for a man he had once supervised. The man had neither forgotten nor forgiven the way Ken had treated him, and Ken was regularly subjected to all manner of insolence and condescension.

Time went by, and the memory of that most horrible year began to fade. Even Ken's life returned to a kind of normalcy, and Jones for the most part refrained from reminding him of his calamitous rise and fall.

But there was one annual rite that Jones permitted himself. Every year, he would send Ken a holiday greeting card, and inside the card he would place a lottery ticket. Ken never said a word, and Jones had to admire his stoic acceptance of this annual barb. True, the gesture seemed cruel, but then again, there was always the chance, however remote, that he was sending Ken the gift of a golden ticket.

# Uncinderella

By Susan Cinoman

**M**

ara felt badly when she'd heard the plane crashed. She'd figured she was the one who would die in a burning blaze of metal and propellers, not Paul. It was certainly one of her big fears, and she thought Paul was invulnerable. Her shock at hearing about the accident called to mind her surprise at seeing Paul with Paulette, the trophy wife he'd captured only a year after Paul divorced Mara. The bizarre coincidence that the new wife's name was Paulette paled in comparison to the extraordinary glamour she exuded.

Not only was Paulette stick thin, a hanger, as they called it in the modeling world Paulette was from, but also her eyes were crystal blue, like marbles, and her white skin was as luminous as an upscale chandelier from ABC Carpet & Home. Now Paul, the urologist, and Paulette the former model, were reduced to nothing more than the tiny particles that their maid would typically leave on the lampshades in their summer home on the Vineyard (seeing that they'd just get all dusty from the sea air again so soon).

The one remnant from the union of Paul and Paulette was little Cinderella, their golden trophy child. Paulette named her baby Cinderella because she wanted her daughter raised as a princess. The fact that the name referred to the cinders of a fireplace, and a very downscale beginning, seemed to escape Paulette. Cinderella had a "big, hulking castle in Disneyworld," Mara remembered Paulette saying—and that would be the namesake of her daughter, no arguments. Mara didn't think of mentioning that it was Sleeping Beauty's castle that loomed over Disneyworld, since that would

necessitate a conversation between herself and Paulette, which was not on the agenda, as far as Mara was concerned. Knowing Paul, Mara felt sure that he, too, knew which Princess castle was which. The reason he never corrected Paulette seemed self-evident. Mara used to be afraid of correcting Paul about things, and now it seemed Paul was afraid of correcting Paulette.

“The circle of corrections,” Mara wistfully thought to herself. She sighed and went onto working on her sand painting.

Cinderella was the half-sister of Mara’s two daughters with Paul. Having no other relatives and a sizeable fortune, Paul had stipulated in his will that Mara and her two daughters would move into the Bel-Air mansion that was Cinderella’s home, and look after Cinderella until she was of age. Mara prided herself on maintaining a congenial relationship with her ex and his beautiful wife, bowing and scraping, as she secretly hoped for a token of their benevolence. Any little bit would help, as Paul had left Mara with no alimony and hardly any child support. He managed this because Mara hadn’t fought the divorce, contracted no attorney, and yielded to all of Paul’s wishes and requests. She chose to sit stony-eyed in a stupor, of what appeared to be utter martyrdom and self-destruction, as Paul ripped the bosom of security and love from her body, and left her with two young daughters to raise, in a state of near poverty. Poor Mara.

Janie and Kim, Mara’s girls, were two different stories. Janie was dark, with lustrous hair and a wide nose. Her swayback beckoned every manner of boy, and her joie de vivre was palpable. It was hard to imagine that her father was really Paul, as he had been tall and blonde, while Janie looked more like a Nubian princess, and couldn’t care less about Paul, Paulette, or little Cinderella, ostensibly her half-baby-sister.

Kim was once the baby but now found herself relegated to the lowly status of middle child, in all of its clichéd forms. Ignored, unimportant, and desperate for attention, Kim overcompensated by becoming adept at

motorcycles. She knew how to ride them, fix them, and corral all the men who loved them, with a fervor known only to the figures found in a movie genre of the 1950s, now long forgotten. Motorcycle tattoos covered Kim's body. Some of the motorcycles sped across the hills and valleys of Kim's upper torso, while others parked on her butt or chest. Both girls were ferociously loyal to their mother, Mara. They'd moved into Paul's mansion for Mara's sake, but if they'd had their way, they would have shared an apartment in Silver Lake, riding, drinking, seeing improv, and waiting tables. Money held no allure for them, and the thought of their father Paul, whom they'd barely ever seen, held even less.

The three girls and Mara, the stepmother, lived their once upon a time uneventfully. Mara cooked, Janie cleaned the mansion, and Kim chauffeured and landscaped (she was also a great mechanic and rode a mean tractor trailer across the lawn). Cinderella played on her computer and her phone, and shopped. Her favorite store was Bendel's, but since moving out of New York, she'd hired a personal shopper who sent her what she needed. Feeling altruistic, Cinderella always threw away her used Chanel bottles near a Starbucks recycling bin, where less fortunate people could collect them and keep the labels as inspiration.

"Kim! Where's the car! Kim! I need the car vacuumed," Cinderella screeched. "Someone left their Starbucks stir thing on the seat! I DO NOT want to have to return the car to the dealer! I LIKE that car! Don't make me do something I don't want to do! That is NOT an experience I wish to have, if you QUITE understand me!"

Cinderella waited while Kim used the vacuum cleaner on the steering wheel and back seats of the car.

"What's this?" Kim asked, as she dug some glittery paper from underneath the passenger seat. Looking more closely, she read from what she could now see was an invitation on silver glitter paper.

*Cinderella, Kim, and Janie Anderson are invited to a Cotillion for Everily Court.*

*June 3rd, 2018*

“What the heifer is a cotillion?” asked Kim.

“Like what in hell is a heifer? The way you two girls talk, you’d think you grew up in Burbank. It’s disgusting. A cotillion is a dance. And clearly I, you, and Janie are invited,” corrected Cinderella.

“If it’s for Everily’s Court, why isn’t Ma invited? We ALL live here.”

“Everily’s Court is a gated complex, Half-Sisters. Probably someone thought your mother was the cook and the maid. And probably she pretty much is. And probably you’re pretty much the driver, and Janie is pretty much the laundress. But I guess since you’re both sort of hot in a completely lowbrow way, you managed to score an invitation. Someone will probably get fired for the miscalculation, but oh well. I have to go shopping.”

Janie and Kim decided to shop for themselves as well, and went to H&M, where they found a couple of cute, new outfits. They were modeling the skirts and crop tops for Mara, when Cinderella waltzed down the long staircase of her house in a metallic and beaded gown from the house of Ellequista, the most elite fashion house in Europe. Janie and Kim rolled four eyes, while Mara tried to look approvingly on Cinderella’s gown.

“Why aren’t you bitches talking? Can’t you see the price tag on this gown? You could get your MFA for what I paid for this. How did my father ever stand you, Mara? You’re such a dolt.”

Mara thought deeply about the question Cinderella posed to her. When Paul and Mara first met, there was a bit of a fairytale about it all for them both. Walking down a city street, Mara walked smack into Paul, knocked him down, and broke his tooth and jaw. Paul was so disoriented that Mara felt it her duty to take him to the emergency room. While there, she fell madly in love with one of the Interns, Dr. Absko Mwambi, from Kenya. While Paul’s jaw was being wired, Mara was making love to Dr. Mwambi in the Moonlighting room. The tiny cot was like a warm cloud around them both, their black and white skins indiscernibly swaying and moving.

“You’re like a goddess,” Absko whispered to Mara.

“No, you are. A god, that is. What am I … ”

Before she could finish her sentence, Janie was conceived, a perfect combination of the world’s best molecules and DNA destined to be loved by Mara with the same passion that she had for her brief interlude with Mwambi.

It was Mara’s guilt that had left her penniless, not her grief over losing Paul’s love. What looked like a stupor then, in the lawyer’s office during the divorce, was really Mara lost in a daydream of herself and Dr. Mwambi making Janie, Mara recalled. Paul never had a clue about any of it and went on with the fairytale of a love life with Mara, and a dark-skinned baby girl who arrived prematurely. Yet somehow he knew.

Mara’s girls watched her thinking hard, and knew their mother had been transported to that place that neither of them dared ask about. They

ignored Cinderella's insults, as they assumed Mara would want them to do, and left for the cotillion. Cinderella, waiting for a snappy comeback from Mara, in answer to her insulting question, hung back.

"Cinderella, you never mentioned anything to me about this dance at the Condo Complex."

"Why would I?"

"If you had, I would've told you, you can't go to it."

Cinderella's expression began to crack like the leather on an old glove.

"Wait, like wait. Hold up. What did you just say?" asked Cinderella.

Mara, now seeing everything kind and compassionate in Paul and all of the raving beauty of Paulette baked into this sad, spoiled teenage girl—left alone, abandoned, scared—repeated …

"No, Honey. You can't go. You're too young. It's not the place for you."

Whether it was the gentleness in Mara's voice, or the realization that her half-sisters had left her behind, Cinderella collapsed into a heap of expensive jeans, shoes, and extensions, and cried a melancholy stream of tears.

The old story of "The Little Match Girl" came to Mara's mind. She heard it read in kindergarten, and it was so deeply disturbing to her that she became feverish and needed to be kept home from school. The image of the Little Match Girl, dying alone on a frozen winter street, and her spirit soon lifting out of herself and ascending upward was almost too much for Mara to bear. She saw Cinderella that way now, despite her wealth and outer shell of designer makeup and mean-spiritedness.

“What am I gonna do. What am I gonna do? There’s no one. Where’s everyone? I’m all alone. What will I do,” cried Cinderella, the orphan girl, so bereft.

Mara scooped Cinderella up into her arms. Instinctively, Cinderella hugged Mara back.

“Will you take care of me, Mara?”

“Of course I will, Sweetheart. I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” Mara comforted. “That’s why you can’t go to the dance. But in a few years, it will be your time. And you’ll be so beautiful.”

“I’m so afraid. And everyone makes fun of me.”

“Well, since you’re at a new school, how about if we try out the name Cindy? Or Ella or even just Dee Dee. And see if that helps.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?’

And with a simple affirmation in the form of a nod, from the sniffling Cinderella, Mara knew that everything in her life would become as it was meant to be. Her guilt was purged. All curses lifted. The child had found a new home. Paul had loved Paulette, though briefly, and recovered from the emptiness he lived with, knowing in the back of his mind that Mara’s thoughts were in the ER. Janie and Kim danced until dawn.

Cinderella made pancakes in the kitchen with Mara, carefully pouring and adding strawberries. Mara smiled and thought about the passion in her past, her daughters whom she loved, and Cinderella, the raw, new sparkle dropped into the pool of her blessings. Everyone lived happily ever after.

# Lost Souls

By Hyerin Noh

“

Man is the master of his destiny!”

“Revolution!”

“Construction!”

“Let us rise!”

“Hail! Hail!”

In the world of rough voices

Beseeching for fairness,

Hansul,

A young girl

At the age

When everything seems queer

Guri,

A boy

Armed with responsibility

Who can’t help

Feeling patriotic

At the sight of his country’s flag:

A blue strip

And a red star.

“Juche!”

“Equality prevails!”

Screamed the outdated

And suffocating

Atmosphere

Their small vision

To the only cruel and beautiful

Corner of the world

They ever saw

The bright

But suffocating streets

Screams of Pain

Bodies in the river

Death and Demise.

Rotten days rolled by

No food

High tension

Distorted truths

Fallen hope.

The start of the Korean War was

“Liberation Day”

Forlorn whispers still ring out

From the bloodied land

“We want freedom from Americans”

Liberation!

Freedom!

So when the sky cries

Only bloody, open eyes were

Hit by the

Raindrops

Two innocent souls

Kind

Generous

Souls

That were meant to be free

Souls that would

Willingly pray for others

Persevered for a decade

Nothing to lose

Except for their innocent lives

Now seemed to be robbed of everything

Their father fell ill

He was a kind laborer

But even the trickling

Of their precious wages

Somehow disappeared.

The mother

That was once fair

And hopeful

Began to burn

A fire of ambition

In her hazel eyes

This human instinct

The moment everything

Breaks down

And the light of life diminishes

Humans get more desperate

Ambitious to save their treasure

To fight for their life

That’s why

It’s so hard

Even to give up

In this false world

Only thing that occurred

Was to save young lives

Her two precious treasures

Handing them a future

That was deprived of them

The moment they met the world

Scenes

Too blurry to fathom

Maybe out of fear

Or out of screaming sadness

Jingling of Gold.

The family’s entire savings

Laying on a rugged hand

Air of tension

A strange man

*Umma and Appa beckoning us*

To go

Run and run

Past the cruel horizon

Like there is no tomorrow.

The siblings were told:

“There is the World past the walls

There are fiery waters

Icy lands

Endless seas

It’s worth risking your life

For that freedom

So fight!

Fight!

No matter how cruel the world is

You have to fight”

On that beautiful winter day

Hansul and Guri

The innocent youngsters

Made a trail

With their sinless tears

Fleeting lights

The sound of guns

Muffled screams

Footsteps of peril

Then silence

They can feel

Without looking

Lives being taken

Down they ran

Filled with muffled breaths

Across the DMZ

The South.

What was meant to be

Democracy

Freedom

Accept lost souls.

Could not be more fake.

Siblings lived

Their endless days

With their souls broken

“Bukhan!!”

“Communist!”

“Savages”

“Nuking us”

South Koreans

Ran down their soul

And shred their hearts

No identity to serve

The siblings

Only had each other

Still.

A painful decade passed

The corners of Hansul and Guri’s

Memories faded

Even the corners

Features

Of their beloved parents

Disappeared with their

Times of discrimination

Is it our hometown?

Is it not, or is it wrong?

What is right?

What is supposed to be right?

Was it wrong

To desire freedom

And escape?

What did they do wrong?

Where did it even start going wrong?

What did the siblings simply do

To deserve so much pain worse than death?

Was the world made

For demise?

They worked at a packaging factory

All night long

Their innocence scratched

Only making them

Starving to go on

Hungry for anything

To survive

Another day

Their factory worker

Suddenly gave the siblings money

“This is for your hard work”

He said

He said to bring the cash

To the factory

Every day

So he could add more

For their rewards.

The wons increased every week

Bleak eyes of King Sejong

In their hungry hands

The chance for survival

The chance for life

The free life

The siblings

And their parents

Were so desperate for

Guri the elder

Suspected something was wrong

The next day the police came to the factory

The cold men tried to arrest the manager

The worker pointed

At the twins

And yelled,

“They were the scammers with the money!!”

The young souls

Did not bring the cash that day

And left it

In the manager’s drawer

They could not afford to keep receiving

From their kind manager

But their thankfulness

Was repaid with

Murderous betrayal

Of course.

The siblings were abandoned

Once again

By the world

The world

They met again

Hansul’s bright smile

Was rusted into

A sorrowful, sarcastic grin

And the boy Guri

Stopped believing

In hope

In life

They were flooded with

Dreams

Hallucinations

Of their precious days

With their loving family

That was truly all they had.

The television in their apartment

Screamed,

Rang out

The news of 25 North Korean defectors

Defecting back into North Korea

But in that moment

The siblings weren’t listening

Because they were following

Their rugged trail of tears

They left

To find hope

To go back

To the harsh Regime

They left

Their fate

Was clearer than water

But the tired souls

Were just

So desperate

To go back

To meet their loved ones,

Living in the unknown skies

# Melt

By Castille Landon

## I

woke to the unmistakable stench of burning flesh, which must have been carried through the ventilation system. The slightly sweet smell turned metallic in my mouth, a coppery film forming, a wave of nausea rising in the back of my throat. Had I eaten dinner, it might have threatened to make an unwelcome appearance, but those days of gluttonous dinners, the kind that ensured sleep, even if they gave rise to strange dreams, were long gone. I couldn't remember the last time I had enjoyed a real meal, with towers of fresh fruits, bulghur, seasoned kebabs, yoghurt, pastries. I especially missed my morning dates, which, in truth, I consumed all too often, snacking on them throughout the day as I welcomed visitors. After all, I wanted to be a generous hostess.

With each day that passed, I had to come to terms with the likelihood that I would never return to those days of opulence. Living in a bunker had become my new 'normal,' and I could either adjust or suffer, but no amount of lamenting my current circumstances would bring me back to my previous life.

Breathe, I whispered almost inaudibly, an attempt to keep myself from crying.

A clink-clink at the door drew my attention. My captors entered, all seven of them, returning from the outside world. Despite their all wearing nearly identical clothing, all washed out browns and greens, and their same scruffy, overgrown facial hair, each of them was distinct. Their names had

been sewn onto their shirts, but as the names were in a foreign language, with an altogether different alphabet, I gave them my own nicknames.

The one with deep wrinkles around his mouth and puffy bags under his eyes, who barely spoke to the others and spent the majority of his time curled in a ball, in his blanket cocoon, was Sleepy. My favourite was the youngest of the group, his eyes wide, his demeanour somehow optimistic despite our bleak existence. I called him Dopey, and he was the exception in terms of facial hair, as only the slightest bit of fuzz ever covered his sweet face.

The wisest of the group approached me, a stethoscope wrapped around his neck. He asked me questions, but I couldn't understand. He pointed toward my aching arm, which hung loosely by my side. I let go of the left side of the jacket I had been wearing ever since the accident, letting him unwrap the bandages he replaced each day, so that he could examine the wound for infection. This was our routine.

Isn't it interesting how quickly a person can go from one circuitous life, to another? We are habit-forming creatures, to the point that forming habits has become habitual.

He spoke again, his bloodshot eyes, creamy brown inside, showing concern. All I could make out was "Snow," which was how they all addressed me. It was the one word of theirs I knew, as Sergeant Snow had been the first to find me.

When the others were working to infiltrate the organisation run by my father, she went rogue, embarking on a mission to save me. It was a strange time, leaving home in the middle of the pitch-black night with a Western woman I had never met before. Unlike her colleagues, she had endeavoured to learn the language of my people, albeit poorly. I knew my

father’s regime was rocky, crumbling from within, as well as the target of outside anger and attacks. Though he tried to hide his fear from us, his children, we were well aware that our time was limited. The worst part of it all, perhaps, was the sense that we could do nothing, either to prevent it, or to save ourselves. Why hadn’t my parents even tried to protect us? It was as if they wanted us to go down with them; the captain goes down with his ship, and royal families go down with their tyrannical forebears.

My saviour arrived in dusty camouflage, as if carried in on the winds of a desert storm. She said very little, as her vocabulary was limited, but I trusted her immediately. I recognized the kindness in her grasp, as she took my hand in hers. I didn’t need an elaborate explanation, as I had spent most of my life preparing for death. I did not fear death, though I doubted she would lead me astray. Together, we disappeared into the wilderness, making ourselves at home in the caverns carved into the sides of the mountainous terrain that skirted the country. One moment, I lived in the grandest palace in the land, and the next, I was without a roof to cover my head. But for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt free. I had cut the ties that bound me to a life of servitude, a life of worrying when I would be punished for my sins, or for those of my father. With Snow, I soared, feeling my own strength, learning the true span of my wings.

And then, as most good things are prone to do, it ended in a spectacular, violent explosion—literal, not metaphorical. Although, to be honest, I don’t exactly remember it. I’ve reconstructed it in my mind, but I’m sure the grim picture I’ve painted doesn’t accurately represent that moment. Every time I try to focus on the details, I find myself rewriting my own memories. What I do recall, in vivid detail, is the aftermath. The smoke, smothering us, the thick air in our lungs, spitting out soot, wiping ash from my eyes. The spots of dark red that blossomed across Snow’s skin, her head lolling, a limp doll in my arms. My fingers stained with her blood, as if I had eaten a bowl of cherries. The sound of my tears on her cheeks.

Losing Snow was the most painful thing I had ever experienced, which filled me with guilt as I was far more devastated over the loss of this woman whom I had known for weeks than I had been over the murder of my family. I wrapped myself in her government-issued jacket, her name embroidered on my breast, and waited for death to take me into its grasp. I welcomed the release from grief, from this life that had proven too painful to endure. Happiness was fleeting. It appeared rarely and then melted away all too quickly.

"Snow," one of the men said, bringing me back to the present. My arm was problematic, but I didn't mind the searing feeling that shot upwards from the exposed bone of my elbow. Physical pain was a distraction from the pain stored in my memory. Beads of sweat pooled at my temples, at the small of my back. Doc—what the others called him, too—felt my forehead with his palm, its radiant warmth confirming that the sweat could be attributed to the unrelenting heat of the bunker, to my general discomfort, to my anxiety, rather than signifying an infection or illness. He applied a white, sticky ointment to the open flesh and rewrapped it before returning to the others.

There had been nine of them when they found me, huddled together with the stiff, dead body of the only true friend I had ever known. The war had taken a turn for the worse, as opportunistic radicals attempted to seize power in the wake of my family's downfall and freedom-fighting nations joined in to "help." It took a while, with the barriers to communication, for me to discover that these men who found me had actually been the very same operatives whose mission it had been to dismantle my father's government. They were murderers. Was the blood on their clothing that of my own family? Did they know who I was? If they did, they showed no sign, as they simply called me by my adopted name, which was stitched across my chest. Snow.

# Accessory to Crime

Sung by Ella, the Witch, in the original musical SssWitch

**I**

want to be a princess like that girly—what's her name?

The one with the big pumpkins and the shoes

Without slippers made of glass, it's hard to show my class

It's not the style I choose, but what I got I use …

I'm an Accessory to Crime, Accessory to Crime

She got the shoes, I got the blues, but I just bide my time

I make my tricky deals for human souls and heels

I'm an Accessory to Crime

Oh, Beauty had a Beast and a Frenchy little feast

They call her Belle, but I smell like the Beast

No one will sniff my pits, no one will squeeze my zits

I'm lonely when I ooze, but what I got I use …

Oh, blame me if you dare, it really isn’t fair

She got the ball, a guy who’s tall with lots of body hair

My face would stop his clocks, I smell like his socks

I’m an Accessory to Crime.

Why do I act like I’m a rat—and talk of gloom and doom?

Why am I cruel to my own cat—and ride a big vacuum?

The Devil makes me wear this hat—my outfit makes me itch

I can’t impress you with my dress, so I confess that my success is acting like a witch!

Oh, princesses have feet that are tiny and smell sweet

You sniff between their toes—the aroma? Like a rose

My feet? They are humungous—and covered with green fungus

If I had just one glass slipper, I just might unzip my zipper for a prince—or a big tipper

Till that day, revenge feels so sublime

An Accessory, Accessory, Here’s to Crime … To Crime!

© Words and Music by Susan Horowitz

# The Large Lineman

By Zeke Smith

## I

t was once said there is no God in West Texas. The thousands of churches that populate this barren corner of the Lone Star State evidence that at least some God exists there. But the West Texas God is not a God of unconditional love and unending forgiveness. No, the God of West Texas is one of absolute righteousness and ruthless vengeance.

The terrain west of the Pecos is harsh—either a prairie yearning to be a desert or a desert yearning to be a prairie, neither achieving its objective. Men make their living playing football, raising cattle, pumping oil, and fighting wars.

Only one family of men built their fortune doing all four: The Steeles. Steele men begin their lives making money mauling men on the gridiron. From there, they put their muscles to work rustling cattle and use that money to drill wells, and use that money to build machines of war. The Steeles are the hardest men West Texas has ever known.

No wife of a Steele man has been known to produce a girl. As a matter of fact, in this moment, there are no female members of the immediate Steele family. Grandma Steele passed years ago. Cancer. Momma Steele went during the birth of her sixth and largest son, Stone.

On the sprawling Steele Ranch, the fortress-estate home of Grandpa and Poppa Steele, there is no whining, no fearing, and no crying. The six brothers are encouraged to prank and fight each other. If a younger brother cannot best an older through strength, he is told to do so through wit. If a brother can do neither, he is exiled until he can win his way back. “The

world is hard," Grandpa and Poppa say as a nightly devotional, "so we must be harder."

From the moment he was deemed old enough for roughhousing, Stone Steele never lost to any of his brothers. Stone came out of his mother large —that's what he believes broke her—and stayed that way. By sixteen, he stood six feet, six inches and carried three hundred lean pounds.

A footballer doesn't choose his position. He is assigned it. Stone was not built for a finesse position like quarterback or receiver. Such players require grace, and what Stone possesses in spades, more than any boy anyone has ever seen, is brutality. Therefore, Stone plays the most brutal of positions—defensive line. All linemen hit and scrap every down. Offensive linemen protect. Defensive linemen attack. It is Stone's job to smash and claw and force his way through a line of big men so that he may maul the game's most precious player, the quarterback.

Each game, Stone sets his mind not just to sack the quarterback but to sack him so violently that the quarterback is injured and can play no more. At this task Stone is unstoppable. Opposing teams will double and triple team him, but still he pushes his way past and brings the full weight of his hard, brute body down upon quarterbacks again and again until they leave the game. No one has ever seen a player like Stone before; in a land of greats, amongst a family of giants, he is the best.

Unlike his brothers and teammates, he never sneaks out to meet a girl and know her touch in the bed of his Ford pickup truck. Instead, he stays in his room, chaste and studious. For this, he is praised as hard-working and serious and devout. "Be like Stone," the coaches and pastors and fathers say.

But what Stone has known since he first entered a Pop Warner locker room is that he desires not a woman's touch but a man's. Not a rough, hairy, muscled man's touch but a gentle, smooth, soft man's touch— the touch of The Sissy of whom he's heard rumored in the locker room and whose world he's only seen through his laptop screen. His desire is for the sort of man who doesn't exist in his West Texas.

Some boys like Stone might deny their feelings for as long as they can. Others might acknowledge them but be shrouded in shame. Not Stone. He knew from the moment he felt the tingles that his pull was toward boys, and for this he felt no shame, just a solemn understanding that his feelings set him apart from the men in West Texas locker rooms.

He yearns for the world where men's hips do more than merely hinge under a deadlift, where they swish and swivel and sashay and shantay. A world where men wear more than team-issue sweats and Wranglers, where they wear colors and patterns and sequins and designers. A world of glitter and eyeliner and moisturizer and dancing and disco lights and rainbows and soft touches and loving whispers between men.

He knows though that should he ever be a part of that world, he will lose his place in the only world he's ever known. In this day and age, that he is gay no longer precludes him from playing the game the Lord ordained him to play, but that he is gay makes him an outsider. He would lose his status as full member of the team. The fans would not chant his name with the force they once did. The coaches and pastors and fathers would no longer say, "Be like Stone."

There are some who might shoulder this loss of status with a bit of pride, knowing they are breaking barriers and clearing the path for the next guy, but those with that pride will possess love independent from football. A love from family or from a man or from a God. An unconditional love. A soft love.

Stone has no such love. Stone's only love is hard.

College brings Stone his first chance to leave West Texas. Every college fielding a football team offers him a spot on their squad. He knows he could pack up and head East or West and be part of the world of his dreams, but he also knows he is young and has plenty of time. One day, he tells himself, one day, he will dance with the boys to the thumpa-thumpa of the DJ's beats, but first he must play his college ball and win a national championship.

As he is the best, he chooses to play for the best, and the best just so happens to be West Texas University.

The wise administrators and wealthy alumni schedule his every moment: when he sleeps, when he eats, when he lifts, when he studies. They applaud and encourage his “piety,” code for his disinterest in chasing women.

His talent grows. He gets bigger and faster and stronger.

He becomes known as The Monster. He allows his hair and beard to grow long and shaggy. He wears big triangles of eye black he connects with a stripe over the bridge of his nose. It is his war paint. He screams and beats his chest and causes his opponents to mentally submit even before he lays a hand upon them.

The Monster is famous. Everyone knows the hulking, hairy man who destroys men. Stone cares not for the spotlight. He loves being a member of the team, a cog in the wheel, just part of the brotherhood. Playing for his friends and for the faithful fans in the stands is his greatest joy, for success in football is the only place he feels, or has ever felt, love.

His final collegiate game of his third year, his last before he turns pro, is for the national championship. Under the bright lights and sellout crowd of the Los Angeles stadium, The Monster lands brutal blow after brutal blow on the nation’s best quarterback until the quarterback finally has his knee torn, arm broken, and brain concussed. The quarterback must be wheeled from the field. The boys of WTU take a knee and solemnly applaud as he is carted away, but secretly The Monster’s teammates clap him on the shoulder and say, “Way to kill that faggot!”

They win the game. They are National Champions.

Coach tells the boys that this is their night of freedom. Whatever trouble the boys find tonight will be washed away, cleansed, forgotten by morning. National Champions are due their night of mayhem. Need your stomach pumped? We’ll pay for it. Need bailing out of jail? We’ll take care of it. Need to get a pimp off your ass? Done … just so long as you report to the team bus by eight AM sharp the following day.

His teammates head for parties and clubs, imploring him to join, jockeying for the status of arriving alongside The Monster. He defers and travels alone to the land he has only seen through his laptop screen, where he has always dreamed to journey, a little stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard between Robertson and Palm: West Hollywood.

He takes in the gayborhood—its rainbow flags, its denizens in sequined skirts and short-short-shorts, the big burly bears, the thin hairless twinks, the lights and the glitter and the tender, soft love.

His awe turns to self-consciousness over his unkempt hair and baggy, team-issue sweats. He doesn't fit here. He is a monster. He asks the car to drop him down a side street, in the shadows, out of the fray but with a view of the action. He sits on a bench and tells himself he will not venture into this world—he will merely watch.

From his perch, he sees a gaggle of drag queens emerge from the back exit of a bar, and trailing behind is a boy in a maroon velvet jacket, with glinting brooches of silver and diamond upon his lapel. His hair is coiffed, so it floats and swoops about his head. Stone has only dreamed about such a boy, and now here he lives only feet away.

The boy carries a purse of black and white and tan woven leather. He reaches inside for a small tube. Lotion. With a grace and precision, almost choreographed, he works the moisturizer into his hands. Stone is enchanted—enchanted with the boy's clothes, his hair, the way he angles his wrist when telling a joke, throws his head back when laughing, and his hands. He imagines the boy's hands are so soft. He wants to touch his hands.

The boy takes a call and the drag queens return inside. The boy is alone, and were he not on a call, and Stone not so struck with fear that he could not move from his seat, Stone would talk to the boy and try to graze his hand, to know its softness.

Three men approach, their gait weaving from drunkenness. They are not men of West Hollywood. They wear orange and camouflage; they spit tobacco upon the ground. He knows these men—not their names but their

intentions. They are hunters, out for blood. “Sissy, sissy, faggot,” they holler at the boy, who tries to ignore them, but quickly they surround him, their paws clenching into fists.

Stone’s hackles raise. His heart races. His cursory senses fade as they do before a snap. Without knowing it, he lowers his body into his football stance and explodes forward just as the first man lays a hand on the boy. Stone slams the man to the ground, throwing a punch to the head as punishment. The two others make a move for Stone, but all he must do is stand and lunge to send all three running away like squealing hogs.

The boy lays in a ball on the ground. Stone rushes to him. The boy cowers.

“Are you okay? They’re gone now. They won’t hurt you. And neither will I.”

The boy moves his arms away from his face. He takes in the monster before him.

“You saved me.”

Stone nods.

“Thank you.” The boy offers his hand. Stone first takes it in—its silken texture, its scent of magnolia and lavender—before he envelops it in his gnarled and calloused fingers.

“I’m Jackson,” the boy says.

Stone almost doesn’t hear the name. He is lost in the softness of Jackson’s hand. Then he feels the buttery smoothness again, this time on his cheek. Stone looks into Jackson’s eyes.

“You okay there, big fella?”

Stone opens his mouth to respond, but his throat is dry. Jackson wraps his arm around the large lineman’s shoulders and pulls himself to his lips. Just

as they are about to connect, a voice trills, “Oh my Lord! Do my eyes deceive me! The Monster is a homo!”

They look up to see a man in pink and patterns and a pop in his hip filming them with his phone. The man in pink sees Stone’s eyes narrow and jets off, leaving his feather boa in his wake. Stone takes off after him. His massive feet pound the ground in pursuit, but he slips on the boa and is laid out flat.

The man in pink turns a corner out of sight. Stone shakes off his fall and continues after, desperately sprinting and searching alley after alley, each darker than the next, until he catches a glint of pink sequins. He corners the man, grabs his lapels, and throws him against the wall.

“Now, now, easy there, Stone Steele. Take it easy.”

“I want that video. Where’s your phone? Give me your phone.”

“I ain’t going to give you my phone. And I know you ain’t going to hurt me, neither, so if you just calm down, we can come to some sort of agreement.”

The adrenaline slows its race through his veins, and Stone takes in the man not as enemy but as human. He sees the deepening lines around his eyes and mouth. The body he holds aloft feels weak in his hands. The attire, flashy on first glance, is upon closer inspection worn and fraying. Stone keeps his hands upon the body but loosens his grip. His hands are no longer there to punish but to steady.

“Delete the video.”

“Honey, I am not scared of you and I am not deleting the video. This is how it works. I am poor. You are rich. I want money. Now, you can call up your Poppa and have him transfer a nice sum into my account. Or … ”

“Or?”

“I saw the way you looked at that boy. Real sweet the way you looked at him. I bet you’d like to go find him and get that kiss. You just won a national championship. I’m sure you’d like to kiss a cute boy tonight, but you can’t be going around the bars as you are. Everyone would know what you don’t want them to know.”

“What are you proposing?”

“For a fee, I, your Auntie Emmanuel, can remake you. Do away with that dreadful mane of hair, shape your beard, dress you in the clothes of our people. No one would know it was you. Then I could escort you around town. I do know everyone here. I’ve been around forever and can ensure your safety and anonymity.”

“You can do that?”

“Big boy, you don’t know the things of which I am capable.”

“Okay.” Stone fills with overwhelming joy at the chance to experience in the flesh the life he has only known through screens. He cares of nothing else. He must have his night in West Hollywood. “Let’s do it.”

“First you pull out your phone and send five thousand dollars my way. And you better believe that is just the start.”

Stone does as told.

“Now, before we move forth, there is one condition. And if you violate it, this video goes straight to Sports News, you hear me sister?”

“Fine. What is it?” Stone grunts, growing impatient. Thoughts of finding the soft boy, Jackson, Stone remembers his name to be, cloud his eyes.

“I have been in this town for a long, long, long time. And let me tell you, big, young, handsome, white, straight-acting boys like you get the royal treatment. But skinny, old, wrinkling, brown, nelly boys like myself, even though we be the bedrock of this community, aren’t always so kindly appreciated. So, if I am going to show you the sights, I want to be by your

side. I want some of that love to spill on over to me. No matter whom you meet or what perks you're offered, you will not shake me or tell me off. You will not leave me behind. Got it?"

"Got it."

With that they venture forth. Emmanuel leaves Stone in the hands of the town's most capable stylist, who eyes the behemoth in West Texas Conquerors sweats with confusion.

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Make him gay," Emmanuel says with a snap, "and, boy, more money."

Stone does as told.

Buzz go the clippers. His beard, ungroomed for three years, is shorn to a fine stubble and carved into precise lines. His long hair lies in a pile on the floor and what remains is tightly faded up into a pomaded flattop.

The stylist works serum into his face. Whatever magical elixir this is eases wrinkles just beginning to form. Foundation is brushed onto his skin, hiding the blotches and acne, scars and bruises.

"My, my. Ain't she pretty," admires Emmanuel.

Stone seeks a mirror but is stopped.

"Not until you're dressed." Auntie Emmanuel hands him a pile of receipts and a bouquet of shopping bags with designer labels.

He pays, and then tears open his gifts like a child on Christmas morning. Slim fit jeans! A leather jacket! Sneakers with zippers and straps and panels of gold lamé! In the smallest bag, wrapped in fine paper, Stone finds a pair of pink underwear. Pink spandex in the brief and metallic, sparkling pink on the waistband.

He slips them on and presents himself before the mirror. He almost doesn't recognize himself. It is as if for years his hair and clothes have

been a niqab and now he is seeing himself in the flesh for the first time.

Stone is not The Monster but a boy. A cute boy. A very cute boy. He wishes he could go out in just his skimpy pink drawers and, liberated, raise his arms and dance and shake his tush and package.

Emmanuel leads him to the entrance of the club. Stone clutches his hand, “Wait. What am I supposed to do in there? What are the rules?”

“Oh sweetie, there are no rules. Just have a good time and be nice to everybody. You are very big and very handsome and will be very popular.”

A small man in silver hair and silver clothes points to Stone and whispers to a large bodyguard dressed in black. The bodyguard yells at Stone, “You, big guy, come here.”

Stone breaks into a sweat. His heart races in panic. Spotted already? He braces to run, but the man in silver takes his arm and begins to pet it. The man in silver coos, “Mister, aren’t you a specimen. That ass. Those pecs. These arms. Now, don’t be frightened. Why don’t you come inside and let me take care of you for the night? We’ll get you a table. I’ll send over all the guys you want to meet tonight and keep the trash away. You drink on me all night. What do you say?”

Stone doesn’t like the idea. It seems too flashy. He’d rather wait in a corner and look out for Jackson. And just as that delightful name sings in his mind, he sees the boy in his maroon velvet blazer with sparkling brooches upon the lapel floating across the dance floor.

“Yes,” he says. “Thank you.”

“Very good, boy. Come with me.” Stone follows him, as does Emmanuel. When the man in silver sees this, he stops and commands, “No. Not you. Scram, you old queen!”

“Better to be old than a lecher,” Emmanuel quips back.

“Take her away!” the man in silver commands to the bodyguard.

Emmanuel looks at Stone expectantly.

“He’s with me,” Stone says, “if he can’t come, then I’ll be leaving.”

“Really? This tired, used Bette Davis handkerchief?”

“He’s my friend.”

“Very well. But he pays for his own drinks.”

The club is all he imagined. Better than he imagined, as finally it is real. Not an image on his laptop screen but real, surrounding him, enveloping him. The music pulses in his ears. The lights flash in his eyes. The smell of cleaner and sweat and lust, the smell he never knew he didn’t know, fills him with a racing shock of ecstasy. The vodka warms him; it loosens his hips, which begin to move, it feels for the first time, from side to side.

The man in silver soon brings men, some young and pretty, some old and rich, who paw at Stone and pry as to what he does and who he is. But he pays little attention, his head on the constant swivel to find Jackson.

Emmanuel, on the other hand, commands the table with stories and jokes and banter. Attired now in designer clothes, thanks to Stone’s largesse, he affects the air of some affluent, successful creative. Those at the table assume the striking mountain of a man beside him his boy-toy and they are looking for thirds or fourths or fifths to come join them in a Hills mansion orgy.

Auntie’s every word is hung upon. Each sentence from his mouth is punctuated with roars of laughter from the crowd. Business cards are passed and inquiries are made as to his next project.

Stone gets antsy and makes several attempts to go and search the club, but Emmanuel keeps pulling him back down. “Do not leave my side,” he warns through his big, bright grin.

Then Stone spots him. He waves to Jackson. The soft boy sees the big man and returns the wave in bewilderment. He doesn’t recognize the hunk with

the stubble before him is the grungy hero who saved him just hours earlier.

“It’s me,” Stone exclaims.

“It’s you?” Jackson questions.

Realizing he is unrecognizable not just to press or interlopers, but also to his new love deflates Stone.

Jackson and his gaggle of friends all swallow a clear pill capsule and drain their drinks. Stone misses this moment in his heartache, but Emmanuel sees it clearly. What Stone doesn’t know, as he has never partied before, but what Emmanuel knows well is that the pills the boys swallowed are popular amongst the club-going crowd as they induce states of warm, gooey love. Not real love, per se, but the illusion of love. A love different than the real love Emmanuel sees filling the eyes of his large charge.

Auntie pulls at his sleeve, “Come sit, now. You don’t want to be rude to our guests.”

“You should join us,” Stone exclaims to the boys. “You need drinks? We’ve got bottles.”

Jackson and his crew confer and then assent, squishing the rest of the table’s denizens together. Glasses are filled and clinked and Stone settles in next to the boy whose delicate scent and effete elegance cause his bones to wobble and his mind to slug. Though Stone gazes at him dreamily, Jackson seems indifferent to Stone’s presence.

“I had the wildest night,” Jackson relays. “I was about to be attacked by this horde of mongrel straight boys, when this man appeared out of nowhere and beat all three of them off me. He was enormous … big, like you, but he was haggard. He looked like a monster. Then he just ran off. He saved me, and then disappeared into the night. I keep looking for him, to thank him, to finish the kiss I almost gave him.”

Stone smiles broadly. He puts his arm around his love, and, just as he opens his mouth to speak, Emmanuel spills his drink all over Stone.

“Oh my lordy-goodness, young man. Please forgive me. Here, let us rush you to toilet and dry this leather.”

In the bathroom, Auntie pats him down with paper towels. Stone brusquely brushes him away.

“What was that?” he snaps. “The whole point of this charade is for me to kiss that boy, and, each time I get close, you get in the middle of it.”

“I’ve been around and seen a lot, my friend. This boy is not everything you think him to be. You’re drunk on your first love, puppy love, but you ain’t his first and you ain’t his only. You think he’s an angel, and I’m not saying he’s the devil, neither, sister. I’m just saying he’s human and he’s taken __”

Stone cuts him off and marches back to the table and offers his hand to Jackson, “Dance with me.”

Emmanuel attempts to stand in his way, but no man has ever impeded Stone’s path. At first, their dance is stilted. Jackson can’t quite seem to look Stone in the eye. Instead, his eyes dart around the dance floor, but, unschooled in the ways of romance, Stone doesn’t know to interpret this as disinterest.

Stone puts his hands upon Jackson’s hips and times his awkward swaying with the boy’s. Stone tells the boy how beautiful he finds him. Then Jackson looks at Stone. Something seems to wash over the pretty young boy, and now he is filled with the same misty-eyed love as the large man with whom he dances. Stone believes that he has made the boy fall in love with him. Emmanuel knows this wave of bliss is a result of the pill the boy took.

Jackson runs his hands all over Stone’s massive frame.

“You’re so big and your muscles are so hard. Are you him? Are you my savior?”

Stone nods.

“Kiss me,” the boy commands.

Stone kisses him. Stone’s first kiss. Electricity shoots through his body. He wants nothing more than to stay locked to this boy for the rest of his life. It is everything Stone dreamed during his endless nights alone with his computer.

They kiss and kiss and melt into one another, until Jackson pulls back and says, “I have a hotel room. Would you like to get out of here?”

Stone nods and takes his love’s hand to flee, but they are stopped by Auntie Emmanuel.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“We’re getting out of here.”

“I said you were not to leave my side.”

“I haven’t. And now the night is over. I’m going home with him. You did your job. You kept me safe. You got your money. What more do you want?”

“I want you to keep your promise.”

“And what? Go home with you? Do you expect me to do that? I would never!”

“That’s not what I … You don’t know this boy, not like I do.”

“Leave me alone, old man. Here, I’ll send you more money. You’ve had your night of leeching off me. You got to feel special and you got paid. I want to spend this night with my love. Don’t drag me into your lonely pit, you ugly has-been!”

“Young man, you would have none of this without me! None of it!”

But Stone doesn’t hear this. He takes his boy and he runs down the street.

For the first time, Stone knows the intimate touch of a man. He and the boy proclaim again and again, “I love you. I love you. I love you.” They hold each other tightly and fall asleep as one.

Stone feels that with the love of this boy he no longer needs Poppa or Coach or Team or Fans. With the love of this boy, he can bear the inevitable lessening of their loves. With this love—with this soft love—he can be happy.

The next morning, Stone wakes. He feels the bed for his love, for his soft boy beside him, but feels nothing. He calls his name, but there is no answer. He searches the room, but he is alone. He dashes to the window, pulls open the curtains, and looks out to the courtyard where he sees his boy. Stone steps out onto the balcony and, just as he inhales to shout his love’s name, he sees another man kneel down to one knee. He sees his boy cover his mouth with his hands and begin to weep. He sees the other man produce a small box and open it and present a ring and he sees his boy say, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” and put the ring upon his finger.

Stone steps back inside and collapses upon his bed. For the first time since his infancy, he cries. He sobs. He whimpers and heaves and blubbers.

There is a knock at the door, and then a bang-bang-bang-bang, the thuds of heavy fists pounding upon the barricade.

He covers his nakedness with his pink briefs and opens the door. In the hallway stand Coach and Poppa Steele. They take him in—his tears and his pinkness.

“So it’s true.”

They march past him and turn the television to Sports News, which plays on loop the video of him almost kissing the boy who doesn’t love him.

Stone continues to play football. He is drafted to the team in Houston. As he always has been, he is great. He breaks many quarterbacks. He is the best that ever has been or ever will be. But his teammates keep their distance and the crowds don't roar as loudly as they once did. When his body gives out and he can play no more, he is not invited to return to the Steele Ranch and run his Poppa's businesses. For once and forever, he is free.

He returns to West Hollywood, where the boys remain young, but he is now not. They still shake and swivel, but his body cannot. The young are not yet ready for love and the old already have their loves.

Stone opted out of their world to make his money in another, in a world that only tolerated him, and the world he left behind has moved past him.

So, the Large Lineman must now watch both from the sidelines.

# Wicked Sisters

By Sarah Smith

**T**

he girl got the prince

But

Our video about cutting off our toes?

Viralicious

Our clothes

Our castle

Our Botox

Our boyfriends

We’ve got millions of followers

True love?

Google can’t measure it

If you can’t measure it

It doesn’t exist

# Aurelia and the Three Bachelors

By Jennifer Hsu

## A

urelia checked her makeup in the car mirror one last time. The dying sun's last rays burnished the golden halo of her perfectly tousled blonde locks. She stepped out of the old but reliable Mercedes she inherited. The scuffed red paint almost matched the hue of her curve-hugging dress. The heavy wooden doors of The Cottage, LA's latest exclusive social club, were open just a crack. The faint sound of jazz music whispered through. The richest men in the city played here, and, if you were young and beautiful enough, you just might gain entry.

Her mother's last words to her, "Marry a rich man. It will solve all your problems," echoed through her head again. After her parents' deaths, her resources had dwindled to almost nothing.

"Fifteen dollars," the valet droned to her. His thrust his hand at her impatiently.

Shock at the high price silenced her as she gave the crumpled bills to the valet. She watched him carelessly crinkle the bills into his pocket. He had no idea how much the money meant to her. She could eat for a week with that money. She took a deep breath to slow her racing heart. You can do this. You have to do this.

Two large guards in front of the entrance stopped her, looked her up and down, evaluating, judging. Did they find her wanting? Was she beautiful enough? Was she too old?

She breathed a sigh of relief when the guard on her right opened the door. She saw an opulent lobby lit with crystal chandeliers. He beckoned her forward. She walked down the thick Persian carpet and followed him to a second set of ornately carved wooden doors. He nodded his head at her as he opened the doors of the Living Room. She was in!

Men in dark suits sat in the rich leather chairs that dotted the Living Room. Young women in brightly colored, revealing dresses flitted between them like exotic birds begging to be captured.

The guard leaned down and breathed in her ear, “Greet the Judge. Make sure he likes you.”

The guard pointed to a man seated on a throne set on a dais slightly above all the others. He was handsome in a cold way. Streaks of silver through his black hair gave him a regal air. His icy blue eyes inspected her as she slowly walked toward him. He clamped his hand on her arm and pulled her down to sit in his lap.

He stared down at her asking, “What do we have here?”

Aurelia didn’t know why, but she felt uneasy. His lap was uncomfortable, too hard. His hawklike features intimidated her.

“I’m Aurelia.”

She straightened her spine and tried to regain her composure, but he kept her off balance. He placed his hand on her leg possessively.

“What do you think of my club, Aurelia?”

“It’s lovely. Very grand.”

“It’s the largest in the country.”

While they talked, his hand crept higher and higher up her thigh. When she grabbed his wrist to stop him, he squeezed harder. Hard enough to bruise.

She gasped in pain and said, “Please. Stop!” He would not let go.

“I think you’re enjoying yourself,” he asked.

“No. You’re hurting me.” She looked around the room for help, but the women nearby averted their eyes. Some of the men watched, amused.

“You’ll learn to enjoy it.” He leaned in to taste her neck.

At that moment, the dining room doors opened, and a butler announced dinner. His grip loosened. Aurelia used the distraction to stand up abruptly. “I said no.” She stumbled back until he finally released her. Aurelia fled into the crowd, putting the Judge far behind her.

Intimate tables for two filled the opulent dining room. Aurelia wandered deeper into the room, hoping to lose herself. The crowd thinned as she watched couples sit together at tables. The men were old but richly dressed. The women were young and beautiful. She felt out of place, alone with no one’s arm to hold.

A warm hand touched her elbow. She turned to see a young man in a white chef suit. His brown hair curled against the collar of his jacket. His green eyes crinkled with amusement. “I’m Nicholas. Want to sit with me?” he asked. She gratefully accepted. “Yes. I’d love to.”

Nicholas was the executive chef for The Cottage. He explained all twelve of the courses to her as they came out. Aurelia’s senses were filled with pleasure as she ate each dish. Uni on toast held in smoke under a glass dome. The subtle smoke accented the fine brininess of the sea urchin. Wagyu beef seared and brightened with citrus notes of yuzu. Jidori chicken thighs roasted and wrapped with prosciutto and cantaloupe. Nicholas rubbed her arm as they ate and regaled her with stories from the kitchen.

Aurelia had loved cooking with her grandmother. When she told Nicholas she too dreamed of being a chef one day, he encouraged her to apply to Le Cordon Bleu, where he taught. She could already picture them working together at their own restaurant. Her fantasies were interrupted by applause as the butler brought out the last course. From a large pot, he doled out a bowl to all the ladies at each table. When Aurelia received her bowl, she was surprised to see a greyish mush.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“It’s The Porridge. My greatest creation.” Nicholas replied.

He brought a steaming spoonful to her lips. She paused. The smell seemed off.

“You first,” she delayed.

“Oh, no. This is especially for the ladies. The finest dessert you’ll ever have.” Nicholas smiled, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

Aurelia looked around and saw that all the men were feeding The Porridge to the ladies and not eating any for themselves. She turned to ask Nicholas another question, but he shoved the spoonful into her mouth.

“Ouch!”

She lifted the napkin to her mouth to spit out the porridge. It tasted sickeningly sweet. Aurelia drank water to soothe her burned tongue.

“Too hot?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry.” Nicholas pushed the bowl toward her, but Aurelia stood.

“I need to use the ladies’ room.”

Nicholas grabbed her hand. “You’re coming back?”

“Yes,” she lied as she left the table.

As she walked between the tables, she noticed the other women’s eyes appeared glazed and, as they began to droop, their men were taking them upstairs. One of the waiters pointed her to the ladies’ room at the top of the upstairs.

She was relieved to find the restroom was empty. She wanted to leave. She had been a fool to think she could find her Prince Charming here. She stared at herself in the mirror. Faint wrinkles were beginning to show under her eyes, on her forehead. Desperation got the better of her. This was her last chance. She thought maybe, just maybe, she could find someone caring who could rescue her from ruin. She held her head up high as she walked out.

Outside the ladies’ room she found endless hallways with doors leading to bedrooms of varying, vivid colors. She heard laughter from a room to her right and watched through a crack in the slightly ajar door as the Judge laid a giggling woman on a bed covered in red silk sheets. She seemed high, laughing uncontrollably. Aurelia turned away when he hiked up the woman’s skirt and started to unbuckle his belt. Aurelia fled, trying to retrace her steps and find the stairs back down to the first floor, but she was irretrievably lost.

As she rounded a corner, she ran into a middle-aged man in a dark blue business suit. His blonde hair matched hers, and she saw surprise in his kind brown eyes. His arms steadied her, kept her from falling flat on her back from the impact of their bodies.

“I’m lost. Can you tell me how to get out?”

“Just follow me. I’m leaving myself.”

He clasped her trembling hand and latched it onto his arm. The feel of his muscles beneath the fabric sent a quiet thrill through her body.

“I’m Daniel by the way.”

“Aurelia.”

“You don’t seem like the type of girl who usually comes here.”

“Really?”

“Yes, too beautiful.”

Aurelia blushed and felt a flutter in her chest.

“Do you come here often?” she asked.

“No, first time. A friend brought me. It’s not really my thing,” he answered.

“I don’t like it here.”

“Me neither.”

He took her down an unfamiliar stairway that brought them directly to the front hallway. The doormen nodded at him as they left. He walked her to the valet and handed the valet his ticket.

“Can I give you a ride home?” Brian asked.

Aurelia’s heart thrummed between hope and caution. She turned at the growl of a Bugatti Veyron. The engine throbbed. The tires gleamed. The white paint shimmered. The valet stepped out and handed the keys to Daniel.

“Yes,” Aurelia replied breathlessly.

Daniel opened the passenger door, and she stepped into his two-million-dollar carriage. The night lights of Hollywood passed in a blur for Aurelia

as they talked and discovered a mutual passion for camping outdoors. They had a lively debate about the virtues of the different national parks they had both been to and which deserved the title of fairest in the land.

“I’m having a really great time. Do you … Do you want to come over to my place for drinks?” Daniel asked.

His uncertainty and bashfulness gave her the courage to say, “Yes, I’d love to.”

Aurelia marveled at the modern architecture of the three-story mansion Daniel called home, as he parked his car. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows revealed Italian furniture grouped in cozy clusters on lush rugs.

The front entrance camera scanned his face and an electronic voice from the front door’s speaker said, “Welcome, Mr. Banchiere.”

The lights automatically turned on and followed them to the living room.

“I’m financing Google’s AI prototype for houses, so they gave me a demo for free.”

“That’s amazing.”

Aurelia stared at the art along the walls of the palatial room. Was that a real Jackson Pollock? Music started playing. A slow bluesy tune.

Daniel looked at her questioningly, “Dance?”

She walked into his arms, and they swayed together. She felt as if she could dance with him forever.

Later that night, Aurelia stretched luxuriously beside Daniel in his king-sized bed. She turned and watched him sleep. As her head rested on the

silk pillow, she fell asleep feeling hopeful for the first time in a very long time. Everything is just right. Perfect.

~

Aurelia woke to the sound of a female voice calling, “Daniel? Daniel!”

Daniel pushed her out of bed and thrust her clothes at her.

“My wife is home. You have to leave.”

“What?!”

He pushed her out onto the master bedroom’s balcony and pointed to a decorative metal vine along the edge.

“You can climb down to the first floor. Go!”

He slammed the balcony door shut, locked it, and swung the curtain closed. Aurelia dressed quickly and gingerly climbed over the balcony onto the vine. Her breath caught when her foot slipped, but she regained a foothold and climbed down. She ran from the house, down the winding road, and through the dense forest.

By the time Aurelia found her way back to The Cottage, it was noon. The parking lot was completely empty. Her late father’s red Mercedes was nowhere to be found. She knocked on the front doors of the social club, but the doormen took one look at her—clothes torn, hair in complete disarray, feet bare and bleeding—and slammed the doors in her face.

When she finally reached her tiny studio apartment, she found an eviction notice taped to the door. Aurelia collapsed onto her lumpy bed and cried. The mix of mascara and makeup leaking from her face onto her threadbare

sheets resembled old blood. No one will ever love me. I will be alone and homeless forever. These last thoughts echoed through her as she fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next day, sunlight woke Aurelia. A beam of light reflected off the silver picture frame on her nightstand. She looked at the lone picture of herself as a child with her grandmother and her mother. Her grandmother may have been the real life princess, but her mother was the one who pranced around the house in a tiara and fed her stories of princesses being rescued by dazzling knights. Her grandmother countered these stories with her harrowing tale of fleeing an abusive husband and starting over as an immigrant in America. She always urged Aurelia to stand on her own and not to rely on a man. Aurelia stroked her grandmother's cheek in the picture. I miss you so much. Was it her imagination or did her grandmother's eyes twinkle in the sunlight? Aurelia stripped her clothes off and hopped into her tiny shower. As she washed off all the dirt and sorrow from yesterday, she wondered to herself. What should I do? What would grandmother do?

~

Aurelia wore a light white sundress as she strode into Banchiere Investments, Inc.

"I'd like to see Daniel," she announced to the secretary.

Daniel paled when she was ushered into his office.

"You're going to finance my purchase of The Cottage. Otherwise, I will tell your wife all about last night."

Daniel frowned, "She won't believe you."

“I have nothing to lose, but you have everything to lose. After last night, I did a little research. You’re actually living off her fortune and she made you sign a prenup that leaves you with nothing if you’re caught cheating.”

Daniel wrote a check and made a phone call while she sat in his comfortable visitor’s chair.

Next Aurelia went to Le Cordon Bleu.

“I’m here to see Nicholas,” she informed the secretary.

She was led to a white office behind the kitchen. Nicholas looked up with surprise when he saw her.

She closed the door and told him plainly, “You will enroll me here for free and teach me everything you know.”

“And why should I do that?”

“If you don’t, I will go to the police and tell them you are drugging the women at The Cottage and allowing them to be raped.”

Nicholas flushed. “You have no proof.”

“I saved a sample of the porridge for the police to test.” He stared at her. She lifted her chin boldly.

“The chef’s coats are in the closet. New students are in Kitchen 2.”

Aurelia smiled in triumph. He had fallen for her bluff.

The next day Aurelia returned to The Cottage with the police, a warrant, and an eager district attorney in hand. They arrested the doormen and barged into the Living Room.

She walked up to the Judge. “Your club is closed. Your career is history. And … your days of hurting women are over.”

Furious but impotent, the Judge cursed at her as the police led him away in handcuffs.

Aurelia picked up the Judge's chair and smashed it into pieces.

Nicholas and the Judge were sentenced to life in prison after multiple women testified at their trials. Daniel joined them for a few years at The Three Bears prison after being charged with embezzlement. His wife later divorced him after catching him with another woman in their bed.

A month later, Aurelia purchased The Cottage for a paltry sum after the scandal blew up all over LA's papers. She renamed the mansion The Open Door and turned the top floor into a shelter to help women in desperate circumstances. She cooked fabulous meals for the residents with her newfound skills as a celebrity chef and employed the women as staff for the restaurant, Goldilocks, which she opened on the first floor. As a celebrity chef, she became quite the rage amongst the celebrity set and eclipsed the popularity of Chateau Marmont. For Aurelia, everything was finally just right.

# The Little Match Girl's Dream

By Akiko Sugita

CHARACTER

**T**

HE GIRL

A shy protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, "The Little Match Girl." Wearing a white apron without shoes, long blonde hair.

Scene

*On the street, the evening of New Year's Eve. Powder snow is falling.*

(Spotlight on THE GIRL. She carries

matches in her apron and also holds

a bundle of matches in her hand.)

THE GIRL

Matches, matches! Please buy my matches!

*(She is trying to sell matches but*

*nobody cares.)*

This is the last evening of the year. I'm selling matches on the street.

*(Blows on her hands to warm*

*them.)*

On the other side of this wall, they have families … I smell foods … But I only have these matches.

*(Leaning against the wall and*

*sitting down, she draws a match*

*from a bundle and strikes it.*

*A bright flame appears.)*

How warm it is! Like an iron stove …

*(An iron stove appears. She*

*holds her hands over it. She*

*is mesmerized.)*

*(The match goes out and the*

*stove vanishes.)*

Ah, it's getting colder … Can I see more?

*(She strikes another match.)*

Oh my goodness! A roasted goose! Look, it's steaming! (Sniffing.) What a smell … Stuffed with apples and prunes! Ah, the goose is jumping down from the table and waddling towards me … with a knife and fork in its breast! What's this all about?

*(To the goose.)*

Do you want me to eat you??

*(When she tries to reach out,*

*the flame goes out.)*

Let me see more!

*(She strikes a match in haste.)*

*(Looking up at a brilliant tree.)*

Oh, a Christmas tree. I've never seen such a large brilliant tree. Thousands of candles are burning on its branches. It's dazzling!

*(When she tries to reach out*

*to the lights, the match goes out,*

*but the Christmas lights are*

*going up.)*

The Christmas lights are mounting higher … melting into bright stars in the sky!

*(A shooting star falls down*

*with a long tail.)*

*(Looking up.)*

A shooting star! Someone is dying … Grandma said so. Grandma … I wish you were here …

*(When The GIRL strikes a match,*

*her dead grandmother appears.)*

Grandma! (Beat.) Take me with you! You go away, when this match goes out. You'll vanish like the warm stove and the roasted goose!

*(She madly strikes matches.)*

Grandma's arms … I'm warm and safe.

*(As she closes her eyes, the*

*matches burn out and it gets*

*dark. When the spotlight is*

*back, slapping her apron, she*

*stands up. To the audience.)*

This is how I die. I never see New Year's Day. It's the same, every time somebody reads this story.

In another time, I find myself selling matches on the street on New Year's Eve. I've been selling matches for more than a hundred years, but nobody ever buys them. To repeat such a tragic life is too much, unbearable. So, I've made up my mind. I'm going to break this endless cycle.

But I had a problem or two. I sat down and slept on a snowy cold night. I shouldn't have done that. And I couldn't resist the power of matches. The flame of a match is bright and warm, and the match becomes too hot to hold. But every time the match burns out, colder and deeper darkness comes. So I couldn't help striking matches and dreaming.

I've not died countless times for nothing. I've been fighting against my fate. Once, I tried calling her "Granny" instead of "Grandma." Another time, I tried to sell my matches to a young mother. She had a child of my age. Yet, at every crucial moment, scripted lines spring to my lips.

I started to feel drowsy in Grandma's arms. Part of me would ask "Did I do the right thing?" and my past memories rushed through my head. Then I found myself in an irresistible, deep sleep in the end, like a tidal wave washing over me.

But tonight I'm different from my previous self. My head is crystal clear, although there is plenty of time until the climax. In this story, I died dreaming of beautiful dreams. But I don't want people to pity me as "a poor little girl" anymore. I have neither past nor future … only this one

day—New Year’s Eve. Tonight is the night, I will live to see the New Year. Tonight is the night, I’ll change the story by myself.

*(The GIRL strikes a match*

*and BLACKOUT.)*

*(END OF SCENE.)*

# The Queen’s Spade

By Janet Savage

“

Off with her head!” About the rudest thing I’ve ever heard. So queenly. That’s me. I wear my robes, do what I want, and dare to keep the crown on my head. The rabble and nobility alike get angry. And jealous. But some just sit back and smile because they know that a crown-bearing, get-what-you-want-ing royal eventually, eventually, comes to no good. And I know it, too.

I stand at the top of the royal mound, the card guards scattered about the hillside of the valley. Today I’m hunting a yellow-haired ninny. Ah! I see her now—her bright curls spill over the top of a pen made of mere fives and threes. Can’t feel bad about harm that comes to one silly enough to fall down a hole and share a table with a dormouse.

“Ace! Come here!” I command.

As usual, the Ace of Hearts comes sniveling toward me.

“Not you,” I say.

He backs away, bending so low I can see most of the design on his back. Then the Ace of Diamonds tries to approach. His usual smirk turns to a frown the second my right eyebrow starts to rise. He retreats, taking solace with the usual inappropriate, low company, that convivial Jack of Hearts.

Ahh … Finally, the fine Ace of Spades approaches. So sleek, so sharp, so useful. He toys with me, he does. I appreciate his cleverness, letting the other Aces show their weaknesses before bringing his bold shape into my

presence. He smiles the deadliest of smiles and I know that he knows that I see the crippled Ace of Clubs, still struggling on all corners to climb the hill behind him.

“What is your pleasure, my Queen?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Queen of Spades wobble.

“I wish to rid our … my land of fools and foolish invaders.”

“The guards have captured the ninny. We’ve heard tale that she understands The Smiling Cat and has ruined Old Woman Smith’s house by trying it on.” He pauses, then leans in toward me. “And that she drinks water.” He whispers this last in my ear, so warmly, so closely.

“She … It’s a she?” I ask.

“Has she pledged to do no harm here in the land that is not her land? Do those who have met her have a taste for her?”

“They report her to be ‘interesting.’”

I see the golden curls turning rapidly this way and that and sense that the

ninny realizes that her time to escape grows short. Shorter than she could know.

“Ah, then she is dangerous,” I say.

“Wickedly so,” he responds, running his hand along his razor-sharp edge.

“Then we must be rid of her.”

“I am sure that that is the fairest thing to do.”

He flatters me. I’m red and cleaved; he’s whole and black, but we share a point. His up, mine down. We’re a good match.

“At your word.” He bows to me.

“Well, then. Off with her head!” I scream, raising my right arm and swirling my purple royal banner in the air. A great shuffle arises on the fields below as the card guards rush to be the first to the golden flame of curls. The threes and the fives slide away and, now, for a moment, I see the ninny in her splendor.

I blush at her simple beauty.

But I will have my way.

The ninny attempts to run through the breaches between the cards, but the Jack and Ten of Spades and the Nine of Diamonds stride towards her. I see her plead with them. They knock her flat on her back. Silly, weak thing. One by one the rest of the card guard flap up in the air and flop down on her until they are all as one on top of her, up to her neck.

The Ace of Spades still stands.

I begin to descend the hilltop, eager to see the beautiful, soft neck of the ninny. (Why are they always so pretty?)

I finally reach the pile. The Ace of Spades nods at me and takes a step back, making way for me to circle the pile. I stop, standing directly behind her head. The muddy, striped hem of my skirt rests atop her curls that are sprayed on the ground around her head. The ninny, red of face, struggles and unintelligible noise seeps from the stretched, soft throat. We look into each other’s upside-down face, which is the way it is for those who fall down the hole and up into our land.

I look up. The Ace of Spades has already begun to move. He stands beside me; we share a point of view. With grace and flair, he lifts in the air, ever so gently turns on his side, and, with a great flourish, descends and slices.

’Tis done well.

The Ace of Spades stands, his side glinting scarlet in the lowering sun. As he bows to me, he bends a corner, our secret sign. He returns to stand by the Spade royalty. The King of Spades stands stiffly, the Queen of Spades sighs. The card guards at once rise and form a cart to carry the ninny and her head to the lands beyond, where those with no will dwell.

# Bower

By Sarah Zeiser

**T**

he lovers had built a bower in the woods behind my house on a bed of leaves: oak, whitebeam, and rowan. The weather was just turning from season to season, the creeping gold on leaf tips shifting to red and burgundy and, soon, a decaying black. The woods were young in their eyes, I came to learn—not weathered witnesses to the agony of passing centuries but slim young things with supple branches that bent kindly for them as shelter. It was cold, not yet to a frost, but their breaths formed clouds between them, her exhale his inhale. They would have held each other close as they did, whatever the temperature, desperate, futile, proudly fatalistic. To them, love was balm enough for any wound. Still, they'd built a fire, and it was the smoke that drew me out of my kitchen one fall morning, back into the woods I thought I knew.

We'd bought the house together, Richard and I; or, rather, I had bought it with my mother's generous financial support and Richard had signed the paperwork with me. That had been the messiest part of the split, fighting with his lawyers over house ownership and spousal support because my novel had been marginally more successful than his when we'd both published two years ago. He informed me of our impending divorce one morning over coffee, decision already made, bags already packed, choice blithely denied me.

"I'll have my lawyers set up a meeting."

I hadn't known he had lawyers, or that people really said those words, like a bad line from a television movie. As he calmly shattered fifteen years of what I thought had been love and loyalty, I held my cooling coffee, feeling

raw and exposed in ratty flannels and mussed hair, wondering about lies and retainers and affairs.

“We’re going to have to talk about assets, Rosie.” He meant the house. The cars. Our joint checking account, growing steadily with my royalties. He wanted the movie deal, too, knew my agent had been in talks. He may have written about fantasy, but Richard’s mind was grounded, his interests all too earthbound. He spoke calmly, rationally, passing down his decision as in a tribunal, and I knew any protest I made would be seen as the futile and ignorant railings of a child.

Richard had always been what my mother called “a bit aloof, but if that’s what you like, dear.” He’d been forgivably awkward as a child, quiet and serious even in his play, severely polite when his mother dropped him off at my house for afternoons spent reading comics, bending the rules of board games, and planning our lives of adventure. I fared better during puberty, gaining height and hips and attention from boys who’d previously only seen the girl with all the right answers to the homework. Richard had the right answers, too, but nobody looked for excuses to sit with him at lunch, to pick him for their team in gym, to ask him to the dance. We began to grow apart by natural inclination, mostly due to my growing circle of girlfriends who giggled and flirted and taught me what popularity felt like. But at our neighboring houses he spoke to me about trust and shared interests and fate, and, as we grew, I let myself believe that protective instincts and fondness were really the embers of some endless love. When you’re fifteen, choices seem plain and self-evident, and you devote yourself to them with stubborn firmness. Richard and I had agreed, as we selected the same college, as we pursued the same irrational career, that what we had was certain and fated. Yet, apparently, when you’re nearing forty and facing professional disappointment, a devoted fan, convenience, and years of resentment can negate the love you thought was chosen with good intentions.

The lovers I found in my woods were clearly in the throes of some young love. No jaded adult, even swept up in an illicit affair, would look for a liaison in the damp chill of a fall forest. Youth and folly were impervious to cold. When I hiked back, off a deer track and skirting the small pond

that froze over in the deep winter, I found the two beneath their bower. Their arms were tight around each other, the fire at their feet slowly roasting what looked like a skewered squirrel on a stick. They were wearing the oddest clothes, all leather and linen with capes and muddy hems, and, on the girl's hair, black like Richard's heart, sat a crown of holly, red berries bright. The boy was tall, face smooth in youth but not gangly, a man's strength filling out his arms.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked, annoyed and curious.

They broke their embrace and he leapt in front of her, pulling from a belt on his waist an actual sword. He raised it toward me across the fire, the smoke parting around the steel.

"Whoa, dude! Calm down. Hey. Sorry, didn't mean to surprise you, but, you are kind of trespassing here." The girl cowered behind him, but I could see her peek around his arm to watch. He held the sword straight toward me, his eyes fierce and brows drawn down.

"Who are you, wench? Did the king send you? We will not be parted!"

"Did the—what? What are you talking about?" I wondered if the sword could actually do any damage, or if it were one of those amusing but ultimately harmless replicas for dressing up. I knew from Richard's conventions how engrossing cosplay could be, how fervent, how expensive, how impervious to cynicism.

"Look," I entreated, "this is really great, whatever you have going on here —" I gestured somewhat helplessly at their clothing and the general bizarreness of their situation. "But could you not threaten me on my own property? I know it's damp here, but you really shouldn't be building fires in the woods. It's a safety hazard." The guy slowly lowered his sword and took a step back, one arm still shielding the girl. I wondered at her silence, if it was a role or natural inclination.

"These are the king's woods. Are you his emissary? I say again, I shall not be parted from Isolde! Let her husband rot!" He spat into the fire, flames sizzling. The name I knew, and their story I understood.

“I suppose you’re Tristan, then?” He lowered his sword but eyed me suspiciously.

“My fame spreads, or perhaps you are a sorceress?” It was starting to drizzle, the flames of their fire beginning to sputter.

“Yeah, sure. Look, why don’t you come back to my house and we can call your parents to come pick you up, okay? No harm, no foul.”

“Our parents are dead,” the girl finally spoke, quietly but firmly. She stepped out from behind the boy, and I wondered if perhaps they were not as young as I thought. Her face was young, but eyes old and sad, and her hand clutching his had the indentation of the long wear of a ring, now bare. She looked to the boy and then turned back to me.

“But thank you for your hospitality. We will follow you.”

And that was how I gained two housemates.

~

It never occurred to me to ask for rent. What sort of work they could have done, I did not know. He seemed happy enough to do the odd little tasks I pointed out around the house, complaining only once about the menial nature of the work. But there was wood to split and stack and the yard to clear before winter. The girl would watch him, never straying far from his side. I would catch sight of them through my office window as I tried to write. He would pause in raking to wipe his brow and she would approach holding a glass of water. Soft words, a gentle touch to the shoulder, and then she would retreat, back to their bedroom. I’d put them up in Richard’s old study, throwing the few boxes of his leftover possessions into the basement, to deal with another time. They kept mostly to themselves, and I told myself it was just temporary, just a small detour in my own madness as I faced the first winter without Richard.

I wondered, but never asked, if they truly believed the delusion of romantic legend, or, if behind closed doors, they relaxed and became their worldly selves. Perhaps their names were John and Samantha. Perhaps they pulled smartphones out of hidden pockets and streamed Netflix before bed. I'd written down the wireless password for them and the boy—Tristan, he insisted—had queried, "Is the property protected by magic, then?" I said sure, since the internet had always seemed like magic to me.

I didn't tell anyone about my house guests. I couldn't imagine the conversations. I begged off my local book club. I made excuses to friends who'd promised to visit to cheer me up. I told family I was knee-deep in a new manuscript, working through my grief and sense of abandonment with the hard slog of cramped hands, smudged pages, and endless hours of staring out my office window into the quickly frosting air. I e-mailed my agent and publisher and told them I'd have something for them by spring. I texted Richard and told him the next alimony payment would be made in nickels (he hated small change). I stocked up on chicken broth, root vegetables, tea, and birdseed. Winter's onset was creeping steadily through the woods, stiffening branches and sending lumbering mammals into cozy dens for the season.

The girl came to me on a December morning when the water in the granite birdbath outside the kitchen window had been covered by a crackling layer of frost, the finches skittering across its surface on their tiny nails. She wore an assortment of her own rough-woven skirt and tunic with one of my old AWP Conference fleeces and an extra pair of sturdy walking shoes. Still, she held herself regally and, despite her small frame and anachronistic getup, I was hard-pressed to resist the impulse to curtsy before her.

"Hey, Isolde," I said, attempting nonchalance.

"Greetings, Mistress of the House," she said as she stepped into the kitchen. She'd avoided it most of the time, only creeping in for a glass or to request something like a blanket or harp or explanation of the heating system. The leftovers from dinners I'd made and left in the fridge were being eaten, but I never saw them take the food. Tristan occasionally roasted some animal I tried not to identify outside over the firepit (he'd

tried building a fire once in my spring bulb bed, but we had words and he wouldn't be doing that again), but I tried to impress on them the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables. Neither of them knew what scurvy was.

"You can just call me Rosanna," I replied.

"Mistress Rose," she began, "I do hate to impose upon your hospitality, when you have been so kind in sheltering my love and me from our enemies."

"Sure." I didn't know about any enemies. They'd been here for close to two months and the closest they'd come to interacting with the wider world was hunting in the woods and asking me for news of the kingdom when I returned from the hour-long trip into town to buy groceries. The news was always the same ("The kingdom is well, winter is coming"), though if I were in a mood on any given day I might try to catch them out ("The king's tournament has been postponed due to public transit concerns"; "Sir Jones got liposuction and the tabloids are having a field day"). They always expressed mild interest before drifting away together, hands clasped and heads tilted toward each other. I didn't receive a daily newspaper but picked up the Sunday Times every week and would leave it out in the living room for them to read, until I realized they didn't read. Or couldn't. Or at least professed not to. I didn't push on the language issue.

"I fear my husband's representative will be here soon to return me to him," she was saying now. She moved into the kitchen and sat at the wooden table, arranging her skirts around her so they covered her feet. I considered my own stretched out sweatpants and Brown hoodie, cereal bowl still in hand.

"No doubt he has gone to the king and demanded my return, as well as vengeance for the dishonor done to him by his own cousin. But love cannot be denied, can it, Mistress Rose? Tristan and I swore our lover's vows long before I was married to Mark."

I tried to parse her words. If she were indeed married, then she was committing adultery. I didn't want to sit on a high and mighty horse, but as

a woman with some experience of the other side of adultery, I didn't appreciate the 'love conquers all, come what may' attitude she seemed to be espousing. Whatever her circumstances—teen marriage, domestic abuse, family betrayal—staying on the run and hiding out in my house weren't going to solve anything.

"If you didn't love your husband, why didn't you just divorce him?" She didn't understand that word, of course. She understood only broken vows. She said he'd never been cruel, never hit her (she said this was unusual for a husband and I bit my tongue), but that she could not remain with him when her heart lay with another. I struggled not to hear Richard in her words, not to layer his excuses over hers.

"How old are you?" I finally asked.

"A score," she said. I remembered Gettysburg and Lincoln.

"So you're a legal adult. Unless there's a warrant for your arrest or something—which you really should have told me about, because I don't want to be brought up on charges of sheltering fugitives, as weirdly nice and harmless as you guys seem, despite the actual sword and alarmingly effective hunting traps—then nobody can take you away if you don't want to go away."

The way she smiled at me made me feel like the naïf.

~

When they arrived, it was on the heels of the first significant snowfall of the new year, nearly two feet blanketing the yard and muffling their footsteps but not the clanking and creaking of their leathers and chain mail. I was at my desk, making good progress on font selection for my next draft, when I saw them emerge from the woods. Not an army, but a good dozen men cautiously making their way through my flower beds,

past the shed, and into my driveway. It was not late in the day, but already the weak sunlight was fading beyond the ridge, gilding their hair and forming halos of vapor when they breathed. They gathered before my front door and one of them with a rather nasty-looking spear stepped forward and yelled out.

“Tristan of faultless virtue! Love thy kinsmen and honor them! Speak with your king and follow his judgment.”

There was no movement for a moment. Then I heard footsteps in the hall behind me. I left my chair and followed Isolde in her draping cloak down the hall toward the front door, where Tristan stood with sword drawn and a face of murder.

“Let’s try to keep the bloodshed to a minimum, okay, guys? And, again, would’ve been nice to clear all this stuff with me before inviting people over. Too late for that now, I suppose.” They ignored me, eyes intent on our visitors. Tristan reached back for Isolde’s hand and then stepped outside. I followed, grabbing my coat on the way out the door.

The men formed a loose semicircle around the challenger and two other men, the first of them dressed in what even I could tell was quite finer material than the others, and the second a man visibly aging, his not-unimpressive girth straining his coat and belt. When the latter saw Isolde, he growled “Wife.”

“Husband,” she said, unmoved.

“Traitorous cousin,” he growled next.

“My lord,” Tristan said with a small bow.

“Rosanna,” I offered from the front steps. Fifteen pairs of eyes stuck on me. “Author. Hostess. Property owner. Try not to do too much damage, all right? I’m looking at you over there with your heels in my vegetable plot.”

The man in the slightly nicer getup stepped towards Tristan and they hugged in that one-armed, handheld, brief way in which men sometimes

expressed affection. The man waved Isolde forward, she curtsied before him, and he then grabbed Tristan's hand again.

"Fair Isolde and Tristan of great and wise virtues," he began, "you come before me, your king—"

"Oh, King Arthur!" I exclaimed. The ending was near, then. But if I knew my stories well, things could get grim here. I looked again at Tristan and Isolde, firm and unbowed before the crowd.

"—to hear my judgment. Neither Mark nor Tristan wishes to be without Isolde. She has sworn vows—of love and matrimony—to both. What then shall be done?"

"If I could just interrupt—" I began.

"You may not," the king said. "Here is my judgment: that she shall be with one when there are leaves on the trees, and with the other when the trees are without leaves. Her legal husband shall choose his season first." The lovers turned toward each other and braced for the choice.

"Now wait just a minute," I said stepping off my front stoop. I pushed between Tristan and Isolde and brought an angry finger up in front of the king's face. "That's not how it goes, idiot. But if you're going to change the story, can you at least be a little sensitive to the times? Introduce a little feminism into the proceedings? I mean, where is your fierce but loyal lady knight? Where is your conniving but impressively effective queen?" I was really getting into it, advancing on him with arms akimbo, his knights nervously grabbing hilts and inching back.

"Not even a badass witch to balance things out here? You can't just have two guys decide when they're going to 'have'"—and here the angry finger quotes appeared—"a woman who is perfectly capable of making up her own mind. Let her decide whom she wants to be with! Lord Grumpy Old McGeezer or Sir Hot Stuff McRomance? Gee, hard choice, huh, but at least it will be hers!"

There was a quiet moment as my rage evaporated in the cold air. They shifted and shook heads. A cardinal flittered by, her dull brown coat still a splash of color in the stark snow beneath my overflowing bird feeders in front of the house. Mark stepped forward.

“I choose the season in which the trees are without leaves. For the nights are longest then than any other time of the year.” His eyes were a marquee of growing desire.

“That’s gross,” I exclaimed with disgust. “I don’t like this version of the story.” I stalked back toward the house and faced Tristan and Isolde, holding hands again. Tristan looked resigned, his head tipped down towards his feet, his trousers slowly soaking in the snow. Isolde stared back at me, her eyes glossy but her face smooth and untroubled. I wished I’d had her reserve when facing Richard. Instead, I had wept and railed and asked over and over, “Why?” There were never good answers for betrayal.

“And so it is,” I heard the king say behind me. “Mark shall have his wife when the trees are without leaves, and Tristan when the leaves are present.”

Isolde smiled sadly at me as I passed her by. I thought that I would retreat to my bedroom with a hot cup of tea and my Kindle and leave these kids/cosplayers/time travelers/hallucinations to figure it all out on their own. Richard had always said—in what at the time I thought was affection but I’d reconsidered to view as annoyance and accusation—that I got too involved with my stories. A character’s choices were not my own. The death of a hero, the loss of a battle, the end of a marriage, all of these things I felt too keenly in the manufactured lives of my books and stories. Richard didn’t understand how I could view a character’s choices as anything but my own creation, and therefore my own hurt. When we handed signed divorce documents back and forth over the conference table in the lawyer’s office, he told me to get counseling. I told him I would when he finally had a bestseller. Still, there was something to be said about walking away.

When I reached the front door, I looked up. The three of us—Isolde and I arranging, and Tristan steadying the ladder—had placed bright-berried

holly branches in the transom above the door, a harbinger of good luck and protection, Isolde had told me, even in the face of stubborn threats. The holly was healthy and glossy still, though weighed down with some snow and ice. The ruler of winter, she had said, and flourishing year-round.

I turned back to her. She caught my gaze, and then glanced above my head. She smiled again and turned back to her king. Mark waved impatiently at her.

“Come. The trees are bare, so you are mine for the season.”

She shook her head and pulled something small from a pocket in her skirt: a ring. She dropped it into the snow at his feet.

“Three trees are of good nature: holly, yew, and ivy. They keep their leaves until they die.” She grasped Tristan’s hand in hers. “I am Tristan’s while he lives.”

~

After the men had gone, I made a special blend of rooibos for the three of us. Isolde took hers with three spoonfuls of sugar and settled on the couch next to Tristan. I sat across from them in my favorite chair, sinking back into a blanket given to me as a wedding gift, kicking my feet up on the leather ottoman. The sun had finally set and the glow of the lamps illuminated our faces and reflected them back to us in the darkened windows. It was quiet and still. I had a new idea for a story, but I decided I would start it in the morning.

# The River of Milk

By Michael Leonard Brown

## O

nce there was a little girl who would say “No” to sleep when sleep came near each night. For she was a girl with scarves of many colors that she loved to swirl in broad arcs in the air.

And she so loved to imagine as she played, and to play as she imagined new places and worlds that, when night came and sleep approached, she would swirl her scarves faster to drive sleep away, so filled as she was with all the journeys she had taken that day, through castles and clouds, journeys still swirling like whirlwinds within her, and she within them.

“No,” she would say, to sleep. “Not yet. There is more, unexplored. I must do the next thing, and the next after that. Whatever comes next, I must know what’s beyond.”

And that is how it was for this little girl, on one most special night. For on this night something new happened—a journey, real this time as never before.

She felt herself floating up to the sky, higher and higher, and so very much higher, her scarves pulled along like flittering fish, streaming they-knew-not-where … until she had come so close to the moon that she could see a sight no little child, awake at night, had ever seen before.

A river. A river of milk it was. Where it began, that river of milk, was hidden from her sight—on the far side of the moon it was.

She saw the river of milk stream past. And upon it she saw, streaming down with the current though yet floating above it, just touching its top’s

shimmering sheen, all the little children of the world with their warm glowing cheeks who were asleep and dreaming then—all the children who, like her, had ever imagined as they played, and played as they imagined, so strongly and so sincerely that they too, before her, had floated up to the sky, so close to the moon, up to the river of milk.

They smiled as they dreamed, some laughed a bit, and each child was in company with some favorite thing: one held a tiny orange hammer and a tinkling bell; another wore a purple velvet hat with a big, broad brim; another had a little green flute that made soft sounds by itself.

But she saw that they slept—only she was awake—and she looked at that stream of sleeping children, and wondered.

Then all at once, wondering still, she found herself now too upon that glistening sheen, herself now too upon the river of milk. So quickly did it happen that her scarves stayed above, open and billowing, as if waiting, expecting.

So she too began to float downstream—"I must be quick!" she thought—and she snatched her scarves back from the air above, brought them close to her again, and said,

"You belong with me, my scarves, wherever we go, on this of all nights!"

She floated on, downstream, she alone awake, others all busy in their dreaming.

Soon her cheeks felt warm. She was drowsy now. Being on the river of milk made her feel like that. But she said, out loud,

"No! I will not sleep," and swirled her scarves at the air's milky mist, "for I must find out where the river of milk begins."

She spoke now to one, then to another, child drifting by:

"Do you know? Have you seen? Where it begins? Wake up! Don't sleep, of all times not now!"

She swirled her scarves fast for them, fast, and faster, and said,

“Look! Watch! See how I stay awake!”

But they slept on. The child with the broad-brimmed hat stirred a bit, and then pulled it down over his eyes and slept on. Sounds passed by her: the tinkling of a bell, tiny notes of a flute, as if speaking for the children, saying,

“Yes, we know, we too thought we had our ways, to say ‘No’ to sleep, but sleep came all the same.”

But again she said,

“No! I will not sleep,” and turned to face upstream.

She began to swim in the misty air, just above the river of milk, her scarves trailing, compliant, yielding …

She swam very long, and at last she thought,

“Now I am very near: surely now I must be at the edge of the moon, and can peer around to the far side beyond. I will see at last where the river of milk begins.”

And she kept her gaze on the deep horizon, beyond the edge of the moon, saying “No” to sleep, until she felt she could go on no more without a moment of rest:

“Just one instant,” she thought, “and then I will press on.”

So she turned her head away and down, for that one instant only, and gave one weary sigh.

It happened just then that she heard a voice—a woman’s lovely voice—coming from the deep night, past the moon’s edge. The voice said,

“You are the girl with scarves of many colors, which you love to swirl in broad arcs in the air. How well you have done, to have come this far.” The

air of the deep night, in darkness before, now glowed with a golden hue.

The little girl's eyes opened wide. She asked, "Who speaks?"

"All those who cross beyond the edge of the moon must go with me. No other way," the woman said.

The little girl said, "Take me then," and held out both her open hands.

"Oh, but first you too must sleep, like all before you who have found the river, for only sleeping children may see where the river of milk begins. For the river of milk, little scarf-swirling girl, flows from the riches of dreams."

"No," the girl said, "no, I will be the one who goes, awake, and sees it all, awake."

"Those before you slept, as you have seen: they closed their day-seeing eyes. Then they were able to see, in the night, all the riches of dreams."

For a long moment the little girl was crestfallen and sorry. She lowered her face, and clutched at her scarves, knowing that they would always be with her, whichever turn the journey took.

At last she lifted her head and said,

"I must try then myself, to get there awake." Then, looking down, she said, "Come, my scarves, we shall make our own way."

And she began to swim again upstream, through the misty air.

"I can keep on," she said, "I can."

Until at last, altogether weary and spent, she breathed her deepest sigh, and said, "I have done all I can."

And she did close her eyes, and then let her head slowly droop. Then she laid her head down, until it just touched the river of milk. How warm her cheeks were, she felt. She let her scarves go.

Finally, she whispered, “Yes … yes,” and let sleep at long last come.

Her scarves now quickened, and began to stir. They swirled by themselves, and took on shape after shape.

“Now we may lead her there, you and I,” said the woman’s voice to the scarves. “Let us now lead her to where the river of milk begins.”

Then four scarves dove down as flying fish, skittered and shimmied along the sheen of the river, now all at once knowing the way upstream. Four other scarves took the shapes of strong-necked horses, springing into the air, off the shimmer of the river, their many colors flashing as they leapt upstream.

So it happened, with the woman as guide, that the scarves took the lead and sped the little girl deep upstream, to the source of the river of milk.

“We have arrived,” said the woman. “You may open your night-seeing eyes.”

And the little girl did so.

“Behold and look now at the hidden place,” the woman said, “where the river of milk begins.”

The girl saw a place rich and bustling with children’s favorite things, and their colors and sounds, each just come forth from the night, all swirling in great arcs in a mist. Each was so new that the colors and sounds, and the things they would join, were still separate and lone, not yet having found one another.

Then the woman said,

“Here is where tinkling is hammered into bells, where hats find the colors they are meant to take on, where flutes take up all notes they might ever be called upon to sound: this is the place of beginnings and original things, where things first learn what they are meant to be and do, and where all stories begin. For all stories—yours too—flow into the river of milk, the

river of the grand, big story of the world. For all stories give milk to the world."

The little girl gazed for a long time, in wonder.

At last the woman said, "Now you have seen, with your night-seeing eyes, where the river of milk begins. Go now upon that river with my blessing, and let it take you, tonight and all nights, where it takes you."

So, now loving its flow and its source, the little girl gave herself over and yielded, willingly this time, to the river of milk.

She—with her scarves, as horses and skittering fish—joined all the world's sleeping children as they dreamed, and saw all the wonders of the night.

# About the Contributors

**Jonathan Demson was born and raised in Toronto, Canada. He moved to the United States to attend college at Harvard University and law school at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. He worked for the Justice Department in New York, New York for several years before moving to Los Angeles, California, where he represents indigent criminal defendants on appeal.**

Susan Cinoman is a playwright and screenwriter whose work is published and produced internationally. For ABC's The Goldbergs, she created the recurring character Miss Cinoman and frequently contributes. Other productions are Cinoman and Rebeck and Gin and Bitters, Off Broadway. Her play Sweet Sand, produced by Ensemble Studio Theatre, has recently been published. Her plays Love and Class in Connecticut and All Me, All the Time became films screened at festivals throughout New England.

**Hyerin (Lynn) Noh, a current high school senior in Irvine, California, is a self-published author and published contributor. In 2016, her personal memoir won third place in the Young Artists Essay Competition led by Gallery CLU, a Los Angeles gallery focusing on Culture, Life, and You. She is published in The Korea Times. She enjoys writing free verse poetry, memoirs, flash fiction, speeches, and children's books.**

**Castille Landon is a writer, actress, and director originally from Florida. She is known for Fear of Rain, The Enchanted Stallion, and**

**Apple of My Eye. She has taken over as director of the film franchise After, having directed After We Fell and After Ever Happy.**

**Susan “Dr. Sue” Horowitz, PhD is an award-winning writer, speaker, singer, and blogger. Her works and honors include books (Queens of Comedy, Read with Me), plays (Judy Maccabee), musicals (SssWitch, Club of Dreams), screenplays (Council on International Nontheatrical Events Golden Eagle Award), songs (For Heroes and Lovers), and poetry books (I Am Loved – Helzberg Diamonds). She is a media personality (NBC TV – Women in Sitcoms, Lifetime TV – Project Runway) and retired Professor of BMCC/CUNY.**

**Zeke Smith is a writer, comedian, and activist whose work has been profiled in Rolling Stone, The Hollywood Reporter, and Time. His honors include a GLAAD Media Award and recognition as one of the 2019 Out100. Originally hailing from Oklahoma, Zeke made his way to Harvard and then to Brooklyn, took a detour in Fiji, and landed in West Hollywood, where he lives with his boyfriend, Nico.**

**Sarah Smith’s internationally bestselling books are published in 14 languages. They have won the Agatha and Massachusetts Book Awards, and been named twice by The New York Times as Notable Books. Critics have called her newest book, the multicultural Titanic mystery Crimes and Survivors, “riveting, page-turning,” “suspenseful, insightful, moving, and highly recommended,” and “a thrilling and romantic literary mystery that unflinchingly examines issues of race and identity, love and family.”**

**Jennifer Hsu, MD is a physician who also writes for TV and Film. She is a cofounder of the Asian American Writers Brunch and an advocate**

**for Asian American creatives. She supports all women through her work on the Executive Board of Chicks with Scripts, a nonprofit group to help women writers enter the TV industry.**

**Akiko Sugita is a playwright, journalist, and former investment banker based in New York and originally from Tokyo, Japan. She moved to the United States just before 9/11 to study public policy at Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, where she obtained a master's degree. She introduced and translated Professor Michael Sandel's "Justice" lectures at Harvard University for Japanese viewers on NHK. She also translated Twyla Tharp's The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life into Japanese. The Little Match Girl's Dream is her first play.**

**Janet Savage is an entertainment attorney and the author of Jay Gatsby: A Black Man in Whiteface. She has published short stories and is working on a story collection and a novel. She is an omnivorous consumer of media, literature, and filmed entertainment.**

**Dr. Sarah Zeiser has a BA in Medieval Studies from Smith College and an AM and PhD in Celtic Languages and Literatures from Harvard University, where she is currently an Associate of the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures and Project Manager and Special Assistant to the Dean of Arts & Humanities. She won the Gold Prize in the TV Drama Pilot category of the 2018 PAGE Awards for her historical drama Aquitaine.**

**Michael Leonard Brown is Professor in the Department of Mathematics, Computing, and Statistics at Simmons University in Boston, Massachusetts. He venerates alike the imperishable**

**discoveries of the deep imagination that we call great literature and great mathematics.**

**Sophia van Valkenburg is an illustrator residing in New York City. She previously worked as a software engineer before returning to her creative roots and following her childhood dream of studying art. For more of her work, visit www.sophiaceleste.com.**

**Hua Szu Yang is a writer and transformation coach at heythrive.webflow.io. Whether she is creating delightful technology products or offering people crunchy radishes to practice languages with her, she cherishes collaborators who embrace curiosity and self-expression together.**

# Notes

[←1]

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